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HUNGARIAN PEASANT CUSTOMS

BY

KÁROLY VISKI

DR GEORGE VAJNA & CO
BOOKSELLERS BUDAPEST

[Title page]

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BY

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WITH 32 ILLUSTRATIONS

BUDAPEST
DR. GEORGE VAJNA & Co.
28, VÁCI-UTCA
1932

p. 1

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Translated from the Hungarian
by Judith de Márffy-Mantuano B. Sc. (Econ.)

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1—4 Thousand

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Printed in Hungary by Athenaeum Ltd Budapest

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Preface

«Young habit, old practice» is a Hungarian proverb. The things to which we get accustomed in our youth we are bound to practise in our old age. Not only people, whole countries practise the things they got accustomed to in their youth, even if the original meaning of these customs has long grown obsolete. A custom is simply a habit, which, like a childish game, we have to practise instinctively, though there is no sense in it — just as, according to a Hungarian saying, a hen scratches out of habit!

Ethnology has discovered the ancient kernel and meaning of many customs, which seem quite senseless now-a-days, and it explains them in the light of the evidence yielded by these discoveries. These explanations are often in striking contradiction to our conventional ideas of morality. They do not proceed along that straight road which is expected of human deeds according to our present standards. But we need not despise them for this reason, because «old customs, old morals,» — and at present these customs are mostly but frames, quite innocuous memories of a long passed childhood; they are no longer vehicles for those long forgotten morals which science has surmised in them. *A wooden hook gets bent while still a young twig.*

In the course of history each newly established social and moral order not only obliterates ancient customs, but systematically persecutes and destroys them, possibly replacing them by new ones. Their ancient meanings get obliterated and forgotten, however important they may have been in their own time. After all — according to Hungarian popular opinion — «even a horse's tail can be trained to stand upwards» — with sufficient patience and dogged perseverance.

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000 Even science has hitherto been unable to give the explanation of many customs. So far in many cases «it is merely a habit — because it is a habit», which Hungarian peasant wisdom thus puts into words: «Death is only a habit, though we do not know who was foolish enough to get accustomed to it !»

121 From the vast complex of Hungarian customs this book publishes merely a few select examples, but perhaps even these will make it evident, how rich, how coloured and to a certain extent how individually Hungarian is the world of our customs.

128 In this series of customs we did not think it necessary to arrange the chapters according to the cycles of life, or of farming or of the calendar; we mixed them up, as in life they also follow each other irregularly. Still on the whole we follow the course of the Calendar.

000 Of the material and the explanations of these customs the author attributes very little to himself; he owes all his results to those industrious collectors and learned professors, who through their work were the first to disclose the wonderful riches of the Hungarian world of tradition. They were thorough in their sowing and happy in their reaping.

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Birth and christening

As yet the child is nowhere at all; that is, it exists only in another world, — it is only «on its way», the stork has not even put it down, but what a number of anxieties it already causes! Will it be a boy or a girl?... Usually the man wishes for a son, the wife for a daughter. But mere wishing is no good; something has to be done about it. If the visitor is fond of the young farmer and wants to please him, he must put his hat on the bed, so that the newborn shall be a boy... But after all, whether it be fated to be a boy or a girl, the main thing is that it shall be «something». If a new wife pays a visit, they offer her bread, but not without saying: — «... I give you a part of its tail, so that you have a child; I peel it so that it shall be red, I cut it up so that it shall have curly hair...» It is a good sign if a glass of water is upset on the table and its contents flow towards the young woman: that means a baptism in the near future... Well, let us say that it is certain that «something» will happen, still the great question remains open: will it be a boy or a girl, trousers or skirts, a fillet or spurs; and what will «it» shout when «it» comes into this world, will its first screams be «o-iii o-iii» or «o-aaa o-aaa»? But there are good presages for all this if the young woman finds a pin, if she likes pipe smoke, or if she wishes to eat bacon, then it will be a boy; if she finds a needle, or if she longs for sugar and strawberries, then it will be a girl.

One cannot predict things, but there are enough reliable signs. Even so one has to be careful of every step... The young woman must not hide a leaf in her bosom, because a similar mark will show on the child's breast; fruit should not fall on her and, if it does, she must not make a sudden

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843 move to catch it, as that will result in a mark of that fruit
784 on the child. It is unwise to throw meat in the direction of the woman, especially liver, because in that case the child will get freckles . . .

845 When the child is born, everything is settled and
754 solved . . . Whether it be a boy or a girl, it is already a great joy and happiness . . . But a little amazement may get mingled with the joy. If the child happens to be born with teeth . . . it is regarded as a wizard. The Hungarian for wizard is «táltos» which also means horse, and now-a-days it is generally used in that sense. The people sense something magic in the fact that a child is born with teeth ; as soon as this child is grown up, the other «táltos» are supposed to come and fetch it, changing it into a cloud . . . In the clouds the «táltos» fight each other, they see hidden treasures, they are very *learned*, they go on horseback, but even their horses are wizards . . .

754 In 1725 a woman suspected of sorcery was asked from whom she had acquired her knowledge of doctoring and healing ; when, where and how she had learnt it? The woman said that she was a «táltos» ; she had been born with two teeth. «Did you teach other people to become «táltos»? can you tell me what power and what duties the «táltos» have?» — «They fight each other in the sky for empire», the woman replied. «How did you get there? On foot or otherwise?» In reply she explained that God took her under his wings, or gave her wings as he gives them to the birds.

Even in 1801 a man from the Great Plain declares, that he is a «táltos», that he sees the treasures of the earth. He rolls his «evil» eyes in an amazing fashion, he has a glib tongue, elaborates his speech with songs and he has a remarkable gift for reciting Hungarian poems.

Long before these two cases, a Hungarian from the great plain is accused of singing devilish songs, of lighting

pagan fires, and with them begging the help of the Prince of Darkness . . . 754

But it is much better if the child is born without teeth and without such great knowledge, because what good is it to the poor mother if her dear child suddenly disappears into the air! . . . She did not give birth to him amidst frightful pain in order that, instead of working with spades and hoes, he should fly about in the clouds, fight up there and perhaps send hail on the seeds to the despair of their poor Hungarian owners . . . 000

Rather let him become a normal child, go to school, be a scholar, a strippling, a youth, a lad, and what a lad! Let him be called up as a soldier, eat soldier's bread for a time, be discharged and then, when the time has come, look round for a wife; let him get engaged, married, have children, get a bent back and prepare for death: then his horse shall stop, put down its load, finish, give back the key, and he shall move to the bosom of Abraham, like any ordinary mortal . . . That is the fate of man, not to become a wizard . . .

The little heathen[1] must be taken to the priest, that his godmother may come back with the news: «Out we took a heathen, back we brought a Christian»; or «We fetched a wolf, we returned a lamb . . .» 851

The little Paloc is carried off; his mother lies hidden from the world in a *tent-like couch*, that is to say her bed is surrounded by embroidered sheets, as though in her condition — in the manner of the primitive people — she has to be separated from the other members of her family . . . While the family is away with the newborn, it is wise to put an axe, a drill or some other useful implement into the mother's bed, so that the boy shall become a good worker. If it be a girl, then it has to be a spindle, or a distaff so that she shall become a good spinner. But before the babe is [846]

[1] [i.e: the newly born baby -- Analyst]

851 taken away, it is advisable to tie a little red ribbon, or at least a string to his ankel, so that no one shall cast a spell on him; and no one must say that he is a beautiful child, because even that counts as a spell.

846 In the Palóc country the women must not go outside their yard for a whole month after their child's birth, and even if they step out of the house they must wrap themselves in white linen, and look neither to the right nor to the left . . .

846 608 The mother has little work to do during these four weeks, as her women relatives provide her with everything during that period . . . Foremost and for the longest time of all, the godmother of the child. This is what the godmother has to provide on the last day of the obligatory four weeks: 1. beef broth, 2. stuffed chicken, 3. four cakes, each one two feet three inches long and just under two feet wide — or to put it simply, as big as a millstone! 4. 16 to 18 cracknels, each having a diameter of two inches and a half; five plates of sweets, and to each plate a bottle of wine. This sending of food, which is usually called «friends' basket» or something of the kind, is done with the best possible taste and tidiness. The godmother dresses up in her Sunday clothes, her plates and dish clothes are resplendant [illegible] cleanliness, — that is how she goes to the mother who is laid up.

851 In some places the baptism feast is on the day on which the christening took place, in others it is three or four days, occasionally even three or four weeks later, that is once the worst days are over and the mother can also be up and take part in the entertaining. At a strict baptism only the women may take part, but often the men of the household are also allowed in. In some places there is a christening dinner, in others a supper. Amongst the Matyós, even in the poorest house, there are at least five or six courses, in well-to-do

Photo : Hung. Nat. Mus. — S. Ébner

The young woman with her baby goes to be «churched»

p 11 [p 12 is blank]

851 families more. This is the menu of a christening feast: beef
[42] soup, boiled meat, cabbage with pork, chicken soup with noodles, a milk pap with butter or honey, or sprinkled with sugar; «paprika» chicken, fried sweets and naturally wine. In many places each guest contributes something to the christening feast: the godmother especially is literally weighed down by the amount of sweets she provides. She gives five or six cakes the size of a mill-stone, as we described them above, four round cakes, six poppy, four cheese and four plum cakes, other poppy cakes and one bottle of wine. All this is heavy enough for one weak woman . . .

At the end of supper the child is put on the table for a little while in beautifully clean swaddles and then everyone gives something for the babe; if it is a boy, this is called «spur money», if it is a girl, «skirt money».

608 But the godmother has not finished her duties when she has carried her heavy load to the christening supper: she has still to produce her godmother present. In many places this may be done within a year after the birth. Amongst the Palóc this is a girl's due: — a red Cashmir kerchief, a linen skirt, a frilled linen shirt, with its shoulder and front beautifully embroidered, (the godmother has to embroider it herself) silk ribbons for shirts. This is for the boy: — a frilled, embroidered linen shirt, a waist coat with innumerable buttons, a round hat with ribbons. This is the boy's first outfit when he begins to walk.

851 A few weeks after the christening feast the Palóc and the Matyó women go to be «churched». The young mother puts on her best clothes, takes the babe on her arm, covers the child with ten to fifteen coloured kerchiefs, — this is also the custom at the baptism, — and goes to be «churched», thanking Got that «He blessed her house with such joy».

774 It is wise to hurry with the baptism, because so long as the babe is unchristened the devil easily gets hold of it,

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774 and exchanges his own child for it. Such a child is called «changed», «changed child». Of course it can be changed back, but that is a difficult, heavy, complicated task and is not always successful. Therefore it is best to hurry up with the baptism so that such troubles may be avoided.

775 Of course the most ghastly thing for a wretched mother is that her child should die without being christened. The Matyós believe that the soul of the unfortunate child in this plight wanders about miserably, and each seventh year appears in some bush or hedge, until some good soul takes pity on it. The person who sees such an unchristened soul in the place mentioned, must take pity on it and throw a white cloth at it saying : — «I christen you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit ; if you are a boy your name shall be Adam, if you are a girl it shall be Eve !» — After this the erring soul is immediately freed, turns into an angel and the Gates of Heaven are opened before it.

Hungarian Minstrels

(The Regös)

533 Minstrelsy is the remnant of a pagan custom, which is at least two thousand years old. In Hungary we find many minstrel practices which have never existed amongst minstrels in other parts of Europe. If the original meaning of an ancient custom gets obliterated, it is of no importance whether something is added to or taken away from it. Thus fragments alone remain. In one instance parts of the words have remained intact, in another traditions of pagan times haunt the tune, in a third the costumes of the performers reveal the ancient custom, or lastly the ancient, primitive human soul

finds utterance through queer, musical instruments and other methodes of expression . . .

Minstrelsy is one of the most ancient Hungarian customs and is still practised in some 170 Hungarian villages, especially in Transdanubia and in a few places amongst the most eastern tribe of the Magyars, that is amongst the Szeklers. The many, to-day unintelligible words, variations, choruses and references to obsolete versions have often puzzled science, and will surely do so even more frequently in the future. Mysterious in itself is the Hungarian word for minstrel : «regös», which is the name of the performer ; the word «regölés» means the act of minstrelsy. These are obsolete words ; the minstrels themselves do not know their meaning. In order to understand the custom, we must know its origin, though one or two of our readers may find this explanation somewhat lengthy and uninteresting.

The word «regös» is derived from the same root as the Hungarian word «rejt» which means to hide something, and the «regös» is nothing but a person who «hides something». To this day Hungarians call a person who falls into trance a person who «rejtezik» that is «hides». Wonderful things are still told about persons who «hide», i. e. fall into a trance. They are supposed to be able to foretell the future, and they are considered especially capable of communicating with the dead, from whom they bring messages and whose wishes they interpret. They are supposed to travel through Heaven and talk to its inhabitants, — not merely to acquaintances, who have just died, but to such distinguished souls as Abraham of the Old Testament. A Szekler girl described her journey to Heaven, the people she had met, and the heavenly situation in general as she had seen it in her trance. These «dead-alive» people are highly esteemed even to-day, and were more so in the past. John Arany, the famous Hungarian epic poet, who knew the Great Hungarian Plain like no one else, was

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787 fully aware of the importance of trances and this is what his
538 hero, who had to go into exile and was longing to perform great deeds, says in his popular poem, Toldi :

Good Bence, you tell my mother,
Her son's star has gone into mourning just now:
For a long while she will not see nor hear from him,
His fame will be buried, as though he were dead.
But he won't die, only disappear,
As one does if one hides very deeply,
And when he wakes after a certain time,
Wonderful things will be told about him.

787 If we remember that the Hungarians, like many other
857 people, were adherents of Shamanism in a certain period of their ancient history, these remnants can easily be understood. But the Shaman, the priest of the pagan Shamanism, is not only a fortune teller, who can look beyond the veil, but, as is usually the case in the religious and social life of more primitive people, is also a doctor and magician, who drives away illnesses and cures them not with medicines, but with magic spells and songs. And if «he wants to hide» — that is in modern parlance — if he wants to fall into trance, besides other things, he prepares himself by dancing, singing and by performing to the accompaniment of drums ceremonial exercises which need superhuman strength. Traces of this can be found even to this day in Hungarian folklore ; of course as in so many other cases merely in the children's playful rhymes :

Stork, stork, turtle-dove,
Why are your feet bleeding?
Turkish children have cut them,
Hungarian children will cure them,
With pipes, drums and violins . . .

781 In the game which goes with this little rhyme, they beat each other with great noise and rapid gesticulation. In mins-

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Minstrels Photo: Hung. Nat. Mus.

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In mins-
787 trelsy, when the descendants of the ancient Shamans come
533 to the mysterious refrain of the magicians, they make a «frigh-
[534] tening» noise with their instruments, and they top this with sounds imitating all kinds of animals. Their «musical» instruments are : a stick with a chain, a pipe and an extraordinary instrument — a potsherd covered with a pig's bladder. In the middle of this tight bladder is a tiny hole, with a reed stuck into it. If someone draws a wet finger along the reed, a queer, droning noise occurs. This instrument is a predecessor of the drum ; some versions of minstrels' songs say : «our drum is a fine iron pot», though the drum may not be of iron, but of earthenware. To these instruments occasionally bells are added and other noisy implements : lids made of tin and such like.

The «refrain», containing the magic words, is an important part of minstrelsy ; the «refrain» has many variations ; but according to learned reconstruction this is what the original words were :

My hiding place is an old law,
Holla ! I hide in songs !

533 meaning : «my magic has old laws, I conjure with songs !»
The custom belongs to the feasts of the winter solstice (De-
527 cember the 25th) and therefore in most places about Christmas time the Hungarian minstrels go from house to house. They are fairly grown up boys or lads. Sometimes three or four go together, in other places some thirty or fourty. They usually pay their visit in the evening, at night or at dawn. They generally visit houses where there are marriageable girls, but the Szeklers go to the newly married couples. In a few districts their songs begin with references to an apparition of God :

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Get up, farmer, get up,
God has descended on your house,
With His legions and His army,
With His winged angels,
His Table must be laid,
His glass filled.
My hiding place in an old law,
Holla! I hide in songs!

Then they wish, that is «tell» the farmer all kind of good things, in one place:

Six little oxen and three workers,
A golden whip-handle to one of the workers,
A golden plough-tail to the second,
A silver plough-tail to the third,
My hiding place is an old law,
Holla! I hide in songs!

According to one learned professor this introduction did not belong to the ancient words: perhaps it is an effect of Christian influence. In the Szekler version the song begins by describing how, when small winter snow flakes fall, the minstrels drove the hares and foxes into the village; and there into someone's courtyard, where they found a rich house:

We peeped through the window,
And saw a bed all made,
A pious farmer lay on its outer side,
His wife, a delicate lady,
Lay by the wall, on the inner side,
A curly haired babe lay between them:
He prompted his father and his mother:
Get up father, get up mother,
Because the minstrels have come.
My hiding place in an old law,
Holla! I hide in songs!

The refrain is sung after every line. — Then they chant «my magic has old laws, we conjured a magic ox; half of it belonged to the Regős». Then they go on «telling», that there is a great ox in the barn: there is roast on his back, cracknels on his horns, coins in his ears, a cobblers needle in his nose, a cube of hops in his navel, his tail is filled with walnuts, on the tuft of his tail hangs a glass of beer; finally they describe all the good things in the house and on the table. Half of the best things are to go to the minstrels, the bad things the farmer may keep for himself! The walnuts are for the curly haired babe. After each line they sing the refrain:

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My hiding place is an old law,
Holla! I hide in songs!

But according to learned research this part of the song was preceded by the beautiful stag song of the Transdanubian version, in which some professors seek to discover the miraculous stag of Hungarian legends, or the magic stag which occurs in the legend of Saint Stephen, though it is well known that similar stag songs also occurred in the winter solstice performances of other peoples. This is how the Hungarian stag song has been reconstructed according to the ancient text:

A big, black cloud gets up over there,
A black raven cleans its feathers in it;
Where a fast river has its spring,
A round, small sward lies.
A stag with a miraculous head grazes on it,
A stag with a miraculous head
Has a thousand ends to his horns,
On these thousand ends burn a hundred thousand candles,
They burn without being lit,
They go out of themselves...

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533 After the song about the magic ox follows the minstrels' tale of the young people or the newly married couple, which is obviously the most ancient and most important part of minstrelsy. In its essence it is a thing which we have met in many other customs, most explicitly in the song which was to tie together by magic the young couples in the summer solstice. These were the spell-binding words of the minstrels according to the ancient text:

Here we see a pretty dame,
Her pretty name is (Judith),
There we see a fine lad,
His fine name is (Joseph);
My hiding place is an old law
Holla! I hide in songs!
God shall give a slow rain,
Wash both of them together,
Rolling them and twisting them
Like two golden apples,
Twirling them and whirling them
Like two golden twigs.
My hiding place is an old law
Holla! I hide in songs.

Once the magic had occurred, — let us hope with due effect, — then it was merely necessary to say good-bye and the minstrels' visit was over.

In a few versions, at the word «holla!» the couples were driven to each other, in the same way as in the spinnery customs the girls were driven to the lads, as a remnant of Midsummernight's traditions.

A buckled purse hangs on the peg,
It is filled with flat coins,
Half of them belong to our host,
The other half to us poor minstrels.
My hiding place is an old law
Holla! I hide in songs!

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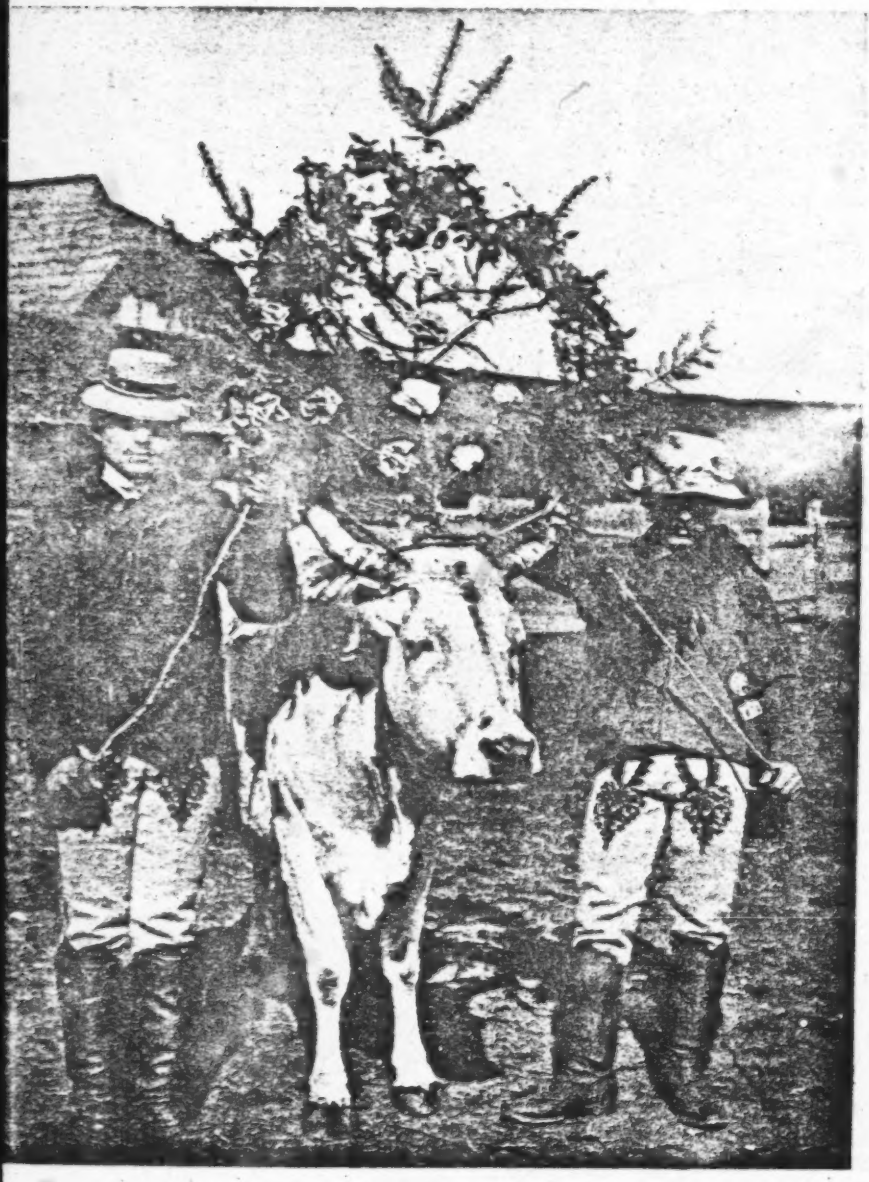

A cow with a sun-wreath Photo: Hung. Nat. Mus.

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527 The minstrels usually represent animals: bulls, goats,
533 stags, pigs, cats, etc. The bull has often a chain round his neck; in Transdanubia the stag merely lives in the song. In some parts of Transylvania, in the districts of the Szamos and Maros rivers, the words have been forgotten, but the interesting mask of the stag has been preserved: it is a grotesque arrangement, its most prominent part being a carved jaw, which has to snap continually.

The part of the bull shows signs of the most ancient times. The performer has to bellow and behave riotously. In some places if the girl of the house brings him a present, he beats her without mercy. There are villages where the queer drum they use is called «bull». The ancient meaning of the bull is evident from all this: the great noise, the whipping of the girl, all remind one of the initiation ceremonies of primitive people, which also occur with great noise and which no woman must see. In a few places the visit of the minstrels is followed by the initiation of lads, after which the initiated have a right to visit girls and take part in dances.

In olden times minstrel «telling» was such a general custom that in the 17th century the second day of Christmas according to the Julian calendar was called «Minstrel Monday». And this is what a Transylvanian Hungarian wrote in the middle of the 16th century: — «Immediately after the celebrations on the birthday of Our Lord Jesus Christ, follows the great feast of the devil on Minstrel Monday, after that comes Carnival, . . . minstrelsy never seeming to come to an end . . .» The word «regős» (minstrel) appears already in a document of the 14th century, meaning a royal minstrel or bard.

Hungarian minstrelsy belongs to that group of customs, which celebrated the winter solstice; that is the memory of the Sun-god. For this reason the medieval Church

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527 fathers and synods persecuted it with unceasing energy
533 through out the centuries. In a collection of speeches, which are attributed to Saint Augustine, but were written in the 6th or 7th century, we read: — «What intelligent person will believe that those sane men, who act as stags, want to be transformed into these senseless animals? Others clothe themselves in the hides of their oxen, or put on the heads of animals, and they rejoice and enjoy having thus transformed themselves into animals . . .»

These words of rebuke have not achieved complete success even to this day. These mimes appear every year to remined those who see into the depths of ancient customs, not to forget the pagan memory of the ancient solstice feast . . . Even to this day, when the Christian church has celebrated since the middle of the 4th century not the Sun-feast, but the birth of Jesus Christ, «who brought the sun itself» . . . the bull goes on bellowing and shaking his chain riotously, the stag snaps his hard, wooden jaw, the weird instrument drones, plenty of magic pervades the house, though no one understands the essence of the custom, nor its past meaning, not even the garbled, broken words of the refrain:

My hiding place is an old law,
Holla! I hide in songs!

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The Three Kings of the Epiphany

«Now in his cart, now in his shoes», — is a Hungarian proverb used in the district around the Tisza; it is merely a joking variation of the Transylvanian saying: «The wheel turns round and round under his sole»; and this in its turn merely means that fortune is fickle. In the «Songs of Bethlehem» poor Joseph begs «a nation harder than a rock» to give him a lodging; his entreaties are addressed to King Herod. Thirteen days later somewhere in the Hortobágy three kings beg poor Hungarian shepherds to accommodate them... This is the feast of the Epiphany. 796

Kaspar, Melchior and Balthazar. They are the three kings! They wear white robes and white mitres and in their hands they hold long sticks, with bells on their top. Like the «singers of Bethlehem» and the minstrels they beat time with these sticks.

They follow the Star towards Bethlehem... Though in this case the Star is merely a miserable sieve, with transparent paper stuck over both sides of it, on which many stars glitter in various colours, but especially resplendent is: the Star. The Star is carried before them either on a long pole, or on a kind of trellis which is pushed out or pulled in with a scissor like contrivance. It is usually King Kaspar who holds the pole under his arm. The sieve is fixed to the end of the pole as on an axis and, if King Kaspar twists the «universe» with his second finger, then the firmament, lit up from inside, revolves on its axis...

Only when they have already entered the room do we notice the black King Balthazar... Against his white robes and white mitre his face is as black as pitch. He was not mean about the amount of soot he applied!

796 In the Hortobágy country, around the great pastures, the kings start their songs with a reference to the shepherds :

Gay shepherds, gay cowherds,
Even the springs are bubbling
How lovely this night is !

Look, there, over Bethlehem
I see a shining light !
There a star slipped down,
Stopping over a miserable barn . . .

In other parts of the country the song is of course different, and at the end of each verse the Star is poked out towards the audience :

Now that this star appeared
Where is the King of the Jews?
We shall praize him with songs,
And with rejoicing poems . . .

There are certain parts of the country where girls go about with the Star instead of boys ; of course their accompaniment and their songs are also different . . . They are dressed in white and their hair falls down their backs . . . Their leader is usually an older woman. — In a few places, when in their beautiful attire they have solemnly acted the part of the royalties, they eventually end up with a little parody :

On this day, on Three Kings Day,
Two gipsies quarelled hard.
Both have been drowned in a pie,
One last night, the other to-day.
This happened because the pie was sticky,
And the gipsies were surely dippy !

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Photo: Hung. Nat. Mus. — S. Ébner

The three «kings» of the Epiphany

p 29 [p. 30 is blank]

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Carnival customs — Lent games

461 Work as well as rest have their own regular time. If some one grumbles sleepily or groans miserably when the accumulation of summer work compels him to start at two or three o'clock in the morning, he is usually consoled by the remark : — «You'll have time to sleep it off between the two Christmasses !» (i. e. between Christmas and New Year.) — If his back aches, or pains shoot through his arms or legs, his consolation is : «You'll dance it off in Carnival !» — Winter is the resting time of the people who sow and reap. There is wheat in the barn, wine in the cellar, a fattened pig in the sty ! One can live somehow ! Towards the end of the winter, little is left of all these things, the barn gets emptier, the cellar less full, and merely a few 527 remnants of the poor man's pig hang in his larder. It is lucky that the days of fasting approach : on Ash-Wednesday begins Prince Cibere's rule, with its endless sour «cibere» soups . . . But before he arrives, let us anticipate him with all the joys of Carnival, food, drink, dancing and entertainment. Ash-Wednesday and its vow of fasting is still remote, we will have plenty of time to throw ashes on our heads. It will not be too late if we wail at dawn of Ash-Wednesday the words of this song :

Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear,
To-morrow is Ash-Wednesday,
To-morrow it won't be as it is to-day !

To-day King Marrow-bone still rules, we may make free use of food and drink ! Love, like a hyacinth in a window, blooms most beautifully at the end of winter ; most of the weddings are celebrated during Carnival on

most of the weddings are celebrated during Carnival on
527 new wine. Small wonder that a whole lot of customs and
[522] Carnival jokes multiplied, not so much at weddings as about weddings which were not held ... Especially at the end of Carnival, at its «tail», round about Shrove Tuesday, when all disillusionment and lost hopes become evident. There are few such bitter sayings as this short and painful lament which contains a wealth of sarcasm:

Shrove Tuesday, all gone ...
The day when girls are left at home!

The last day of Carnival is the most frolicsome, the noisiest and most ironical moment of the year; it is the time of the freeest entertainments and most generous feasts. It is the poor man's «horn of plenty»; «compared to it Christmas is nothing» — say the Paloc Hungarians — «it is the feast of the spendthrifts».

Of course amateur performers are not missing amidst the many Carnival jokes. In some places they «carry out jail birds» on Carnival's tail. Two lads are wound round from top to toe with straw ropes, on the head of one they put a plumed hat, on the head of the other they tie a scarf; their faces are blackened with soot, they have to hold a hatchet or an axe, both are chained and thus they are paraded from house to house. In their wake follow boys and girls with the accompaniment of music and song. At each house they are given something, and from the things thus collected they arrange a grand dinner. In other places King Marrow-bone is buried or they «carry out winter», as Prince Cibere is carried out at the end of Lent, in the person of some willing performer. The custom of dragging a tree-trunk through the village is also still alive. A big stem is pulled along with ropes and in front of the houses of marriageable girls the procession stops, shouting:

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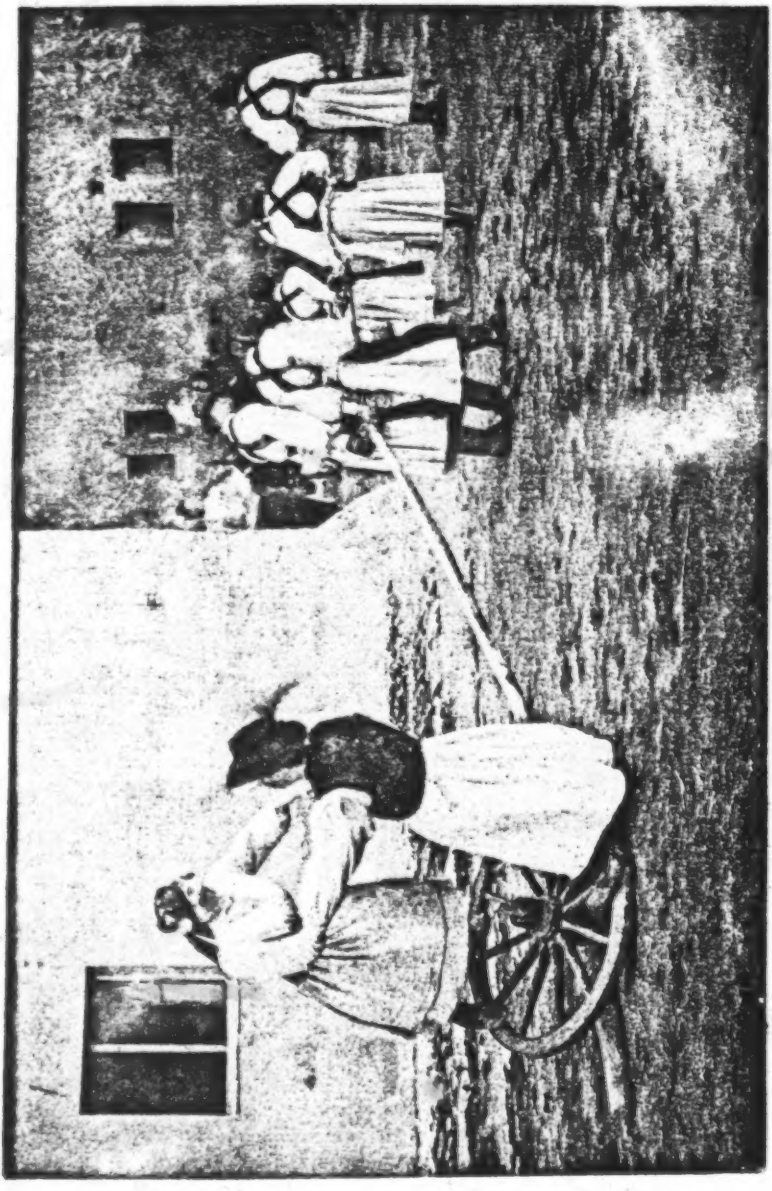

The carnival wheel Photo : Hung. Nat. Mus. — S. Ébner

p 33 [p 34 is blank]

527

Wail, wail, wail, wail,
I was left out of Carnival!

With this they tease especially the proud and stuck-up girls, who have refused some lad. In the North-eastern part of Hungary another custom, very like the dragging of a trunk, was fashionable. There they fixed two dolls — representing a man and a girl — to a cart-wheel and trundled it through the village before the Shrove-Tuesday entertainment. A horse drew the wheel, being harnessed to it by a long rope. Behind it followed a merry crowd, with song and music and dancing. This is illustrated — but already as a spring custom — by our picture of the County of Sopron[1] Here children draw the wheel, — since every ancient custom ends in children's hands. Children's games are the last stage but one of ancient customs. After that come decay and oblivion.

Driving out the «virgin herd» is a costum practiced in the district beyond the Tisza. The «virgin herd» is a whole crowd of children equipped with all kinds of noisy instruments. The «virgin herd» is driven with cracking whips into the yard of every house in which a marriageable girl has not got engaged, and the farmer is asked to send the girl into the «herd».

The riotous entertainments at the end of Carnival last from its last Sunday to Ash-Wednesday, on which day one can still practise «dawn jokes», that is make some din at dawn, which is certain to disturb sleep and rest. After that we can throw ashes on our heads, repent us of our sins, lose what-ever weight we put on during the plenty of Carnival, and at the weddings celebrated «in the hills and the valleys». Then we must make our fasting vow . . .

ooo During Lent godly, good Catholics know no dance, music or entertainment. But the young people must find

[1] [See category 116, p. 33 — Analyst]

526 During Lent godly, good Catholics know no dance
883 music or entertainment. But the young people must find some means to enable boys and girls to breathe the same air. To this end there are Lent games. One of these queer Lent games is the «mancsozás» of the Palóc, an interesting ball game. But let us begin earlier than that, as this game has antecedents. It is a custom of the Palóc people (a particular tribe of the Hungarians) that at Carnival or fair dances a girl sends a bunch of flowers to her lover by her godmother. While dancing it blooms on his hat ... As an answer to this and to express his gratitude the lad, accompanied by a friend of his, brings the girl a «mancsozó». In return he gets any amount of excellent food. The «mancs» is a wooden ball, about the size of a nut, decorated with designs which are burnt into it. The «mancsozó» is an extraordinarily shaped stick, looking like a speaking-trumpet. It is even more extensively decorated than the «mancs» and is used for hitting the «mancs», as «mancsozás» is a ball game with peculiar rules. The wooden ball is not thrown with the hand, as is usually the case when playing ball, but the «mancs» must be thrown into the air and hit with the stick. At that moment the stick emits a sound, as in the bottom of it there is a bottle, closed with a stopper, and into the bottle the carver of the stick has put shot.

524 An even more interesting Lent game is the «sajbózás»,
883 which reminds one of Midsummernight customs. This strange game with fire is still played on the Northern reaches of the Tisza river. Its special date is the first Sunday of Lent. The «sajbó» is a wooden ring, with a diameter of half a foot. Each lad makes about 15 to 20 of them. A long stick is also wanted for the game; each lad has to take one with him. In the day time they build a small reed hovel on the village pasture, with a door so tiny that it only allows one person to stick his hands into it. Before the hut they put a bench or chair, and lean a plank askew against it, one of its ends being on the ground, and the other on the chair

or bench. After dark the lads go to the hut with their long sticks and bunches of «sajbós». The girls are already expecting them, walking round the hut and singing. At the end of the song they kneel down and pray. Then the first girl of the village sets the hut on fire with a candle which has been blessed. At the fire the lads heat the «sajbó» rings one by one, until they glow. The strongest lad of the village has the first turn. When his «sajbó» is glowing, he shouts : 524 883

Sajbó, sajbó, whose sajbó is this?
This sajbó belongs to the Holy Virgin!

And with his stick he dashes the ring with such force against the plank, that it breaks away from the stick and flies off, cutting a fiery snake-like pattern in the darkness . . . Thus the game continues until they have shouted the names of all the saints, that is as many as they know by heart. Then they throw «sajbós» for the mothers, the fathers, eventually for the whole village; even the gipsies are remembered! Of course they do not forget their own selves, and when they have got to this point, couples are often shouted out together :

Sajbó, sajbó, whose sajbó is this?
It is mine and my sweetheart's!

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Customs of Saint Gregory's and Saint Blase's days

857 It is no great compliment to be called a «knight of Saint Gregory's» in Hungarian... as Pope Gregory's knights are merely «tiddlers» amongst men:

As young trees
In an orchard,
Children and good boys
Are brought up
By God...

[776] Saint Gregory as well as Saint Blase are the patrons of children and teaching. The troupe of schoolchildren, who go round the houses singing on Saint Blase's day (the [796] 3rd of February) and on Saint Gregory's day (the 12th of March) are the army of these saints... They are also dressed like soldiers with shakos and wooden swords... And so that everyone shall be sure of this, they sing:

I'm a soldier,
I stand on my heels,
I look around proudly
And gnash my teeth:
I know I look frightening...

But we are not as easily impressed as all that, even though they brandish their swords, they are only the envoys of saints... They recruit for their school the children who want to play truant; occasionally they even collect financial support for their schoolmaster. They like to copy the military forms of real recruiting. This is no wonder, as on few other occasions in the Hungarian past did such beautiful

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scenes, such fascinating and charming dances occur as during the recruiting of Hungarian soldiers. The memory of all this is alive in their childish rhymes : 857

Bishop Blase sent out
His smart recruiting sergeants,
He had his red flag
Stuck into the midst of the market.
Now dear little friend
Let's have a grand time :
Our bottle is filled with wine
Let us dance gaily and happily !

Of course there is no question of wine, but the baby troupe is truly a gay, lively, joking crowd. Like the real recruiters, the dancing hussars, who praised the gallant soldier life, they praise the school where the master provides the music, and if he bends his whip, there is plenty of opportunity for dancing . . .

Before learning became obligatory, Saint Blase's soldiers lured the truants with the beauties of learning to spell. As Saint Blase's day falls in the Carnival, there are plenty of references to it in the eloquent spelling rhymes : 857 522

S, E, D : this little girl is so depres*SED*,
that she could not put up her hair
and did not get married !
E, E, E : don't be so d*EjEctEd* !

But they laugh also at themselves according to the following verse :

unch, unch, unch : what's the scholar's *lunch?*
we know that it is soup or pap,
I wish I had never seen or tasted it !
unch, unch, unch : what's the scholar's *lunch?*

Other well-known jokes also appear in their verses, such as the dragging of the trunks along the village to enrage the girls who did not get married :

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Ohi, ohi, ohi, away,
To-day it is Ash-Wednesday,
Girls, you better drag the trunk
Onto the nearest main road.

857 The military touch displayed in these two customs,[1] is
[212] the explanation of the fact that Hungarian children grew so fond of them, although they are purely Christian — that is fairly recent — customs. The spelling is also of Western origin; it is only here that the Hungarians learnt Western writing. It is true that this was very long ago : already in 1055 Hungarian words were written with Latin letters. Their ancient writing, which the Hungarians had brought with them from the East, had been runes traced from right to left. Bonfinio, the court historian of King Mathias, made this comment on it : — «with few signs they express much meaning». The oldest document of this ancient Hungarian writing dates from 1515. But the ancient runes were gradually forgotten, and the Hungarians also enlisted as Saint Gregory's knights
[867] and Saint Blase's spelling soldiers. — They learnt a great many good and beautiful things. They learnt the Golden ABC, which had arranged in alphabetical order all the highest Christian moral teachings, and nothing was left out of this collection ! This is how it began :

a : all that you do not want for yourself
you must not do it to others !

b : burden the servants of your house
as much as you want to be burdened yourself !

When the Protestant students of Sárospatak (a historic Hungarian college) grew tired of these perpetual moral teachings, they made parodies of these verses. This is what they invented for the letters :

[1] [i.e: The recruiting of truants for their schools and the singing of spelling rhymes -- Analyst]

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Photo : A. Wagenhuber

Easter sprinklers receiving painted eggs

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s: Storks on the house chatter,
What is not of linen may be of leather.
One armchair is not a box,
Charles the 9th may yet live long!

But enough of all this teaching, and of the «a b : ab, and all the rhymes, the best we can do is to wait for the presents and then, in the words of Saint Blase's soldiers: «In God's name, let the whole crowd of us go next door!» It is high time that:

e, d : ed : our poem shall be finish-e-d ;
we can't dally here any longer,
we have to hurry on ;
e, d : ed : The Name of Jesus be bless-e-d !

Easter customs

796 [785] The Hungarian word for Easter «húsvét» means the eating of meat, that is to say the time when people stop fasting strictly. On Shrove Tuesday people give up eating meat and it is only at Easter that they take to it again — and very glad they are to do so. In Catholic districts the fasting rule is taken very seriously ; it is particularly hard for those who do not live on rich food anyhow. Even apart from Lent there are many more days in the year than there are sausages in their larder. Towards the end of [262] Lent Prince Cibere («cibere» is a cabbage soup, a poor Lent dish) declares war on King Marrow-bone : the thin fasting soup on the good marrow-bone, fasting on satiety, human patience on human desire... The fight is already decided before Easter : according to popular custom on Palm Sunday. The Prince and the King measure their force twice every year : on Shrove Tuesday and on Palm

796 Sunday. On Shrove Tuesday Prince Cibere wins; at Easter King Marrow-bone, or, as he is called in other parts of the country, King Bone would be the victor, but the people settle the fray as early as Palm Sunday. A Hungarian poem of the 18th century already refers to the battle of Shrove Tuesday; then Prince Cibere took over the government, while Duke Marrow-bone lay prostrate on the ground for fourty days.

[789] Prince Cibere is a doll, made of rags and straw. They carry «him» through the village singing happily and at the end of the village he is either burnt, or drowned, or thrown over the village boundary. Shameful is his death and enormous the joy caused by his passing:

Villő! Villő! At the end of the village is a silken tent,
Let us sing there as merrily as at other times,
Villő! Villő! Let's carry out the *Kicevice*
And bring back the bone and marrow, villő! villő!

[262] The *Kicevice* means exactly the same thing as the cibere, at least as far as its merits go. Its other name is «*Kisze*», which is a fruit soup or a kind of paste made of oatmeal and leaven, and it is eaten during Lent with milk, honey and water or plum sauce. It is a very poor Lent food, — small wonder that it is carried out of the village with such joy... This joy is thus worded and expressed in other parts of the country:

Out with you *Kisze*, out with you,
Out you go, *Kisze*, out! out! out!
Come in ham, come in quick,
Come in ham and dumplings big!

[789] Popular belief has it that with the banishment of Prince Cibere, that is the «kisze», all illness and trouble, measles and such like are expelled from the village. The procedure is also supposed to help against hail.

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Photo: A. Wagenhuber

Easter sprinkling

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783 Spring has arrived, and therefore people are filled with thoughts about the fate of the crops. Will there be a revival of nature, will there be a renewal of everything, will there be a good harvest, fertility? ... Let everything be refreshed and cleaned ... They dust, mend, whitewash, scrub, wash; men clean themselves, animals are bathed, even the soul is spring cleaned, this being the period of industrious confessing ... Everything is resplendent with cleanliness. According to a popular song even the raven washes her son on Good Friday ...

783 In old Hungarian calendars the second day of Easter is called «Ducking Monday», because on this day it was 883 the custom to throw the girls into water and duck them. Now-a-days the custom is much milder, as the girls are no longer thrown into water; the lads merely lay them in the trough and refresh them with a few buckets of water so that if they marry they may become bright women. And if we add, that in some districts all this happens at the creak of dawn, it is evident that the custom is a fairly drastic one for girls even at present! Where the custom is even milder, the girls are only dragged to a well, and they pass the ceremony of the katharsis at the expense of a few buckets of water. This is well worth their while, because lovely flowers thus watered will certainly not wither away.

Not only must the girls put a good face on their enforced early morning bath, they must even pay for it: with rolls, a glass or two of brandy, in most places with a few painted eggs. These may be boiled or raw, and in Hungarian they are called «red eggs» as they are mostly painted red.

775 The egg has a manifold symbolic meaning, dating from ancient, even pre-historic times: in the latter it had a realistic religious meaning. In pre-historic tombs egg

775 shells are as often found as in medieval graves. Already at that time they were the symbol of resurrection, or were even designed to promote resurrection. In China the presenting of eggs in spring is a two thousand year old custom. Christianity took it over from the ancient people, and made it the symbol of the Saviour's resurrection. In the ancient faith of some peoples the universe developed from an egg, just as Castor and Pollux, who of old personnified light and shadow, were hatched from Leda's egg.

883 In some parts of the country Hungarian children, boys and girls, give each other painted eggs, which are regarded as tokens of engagement or friendship; and after having exchanged eggs, they call each other «fiancé» or friend.

531 The painting of eggs has a special technique. The designs are drawn on the eggs with wax, and the eggs are then dipped into cold paint. Painted eggs form one of the most interesting and from the point of view of design, most varied fields of Hungarian art. As in all brands of Hungarian popular art, here too flower designs are the most wide-spread form of decoration; usually red designs are applied on a white foundation. But there are plenty of brightly decorated eggs, especially amongst the Szeklers.

531 883 It is even more interesting that in some parts they shoe the eggs with tiny metal shoes, — and as the eggs are Hungarian, they even give them tiny metal spurs: they also put metal hangers on them. What can the explanation of this strange custom be? Probably that other custom, whereby the lads in some villages set up Easter trees (usually on Easter night) on the girls' gates, and on these they hang amongst other things eggs. These are called the «coat of arms» of the lads!

[Easter -- Analyst]

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Photo: Hung. Nat. Mus. — S. Ébner

Painting of Easter eggs

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Girl markets

443 583 Marriegeable girls — in a literal translation from the Hungarian «girls for sale» — were always plentiful in Hungary, and there is no lack of them at present either. There have always been girl markets, and there still are to-day, although one Hungarian man could only buy one girl, even in ancient times, at least according to the rules and laws which prevailed in those days. In speaking of girl markets, we naturally do not think of genteel balls and other social gatherings and opportunities of meeting people; but of the markets and fairs where the common people had a chance of getting acquainted and where in olden days the purchase of a woman was made as quickly as that of any other desirable object.

443 583 563 Especially in those parts of pre-Trianon Hungary which were inhabited by different nationalities there have been, and perhaps still are, well known girl markets. After the devastations of the Mongol raid and the Turkish occupation, Southern Slavs and Roumanians poured into Hungary from the Balkans and Ruthenians came in from [361] Galicia. These newcomers mostly settled in families on cleared patches of forest land, and down to our own days they hardly ever formed real villages. This was especially the case with Ruthenians and the Vlachs. The inhabitants of these scattered settlements hardly ever came into touch with each other; at the best of times just the 443 583 nearest neighbours knew one another. Once or twice a year they gathered to exchange goods and therefore arranged a market. These markets were also opportunities for getting acquainted. The «popa» (their priest) was also near at hand and the lad who, besides the many attrac-

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443 583 tive goods in the market, also found a pleasing girl, had not far to go for a holy man who would tighten his rosary and give them his blessing.

An Alpine group of the Transylvanian Vlachs, called «Móc», held once a year, at the beginning of the summer, a market of this kind on top of a mountain called Gaina. The «Móc» lad asked the girl whom he thought attractive whether her Alpine horn was for sale; if she answered that this was so, their agreement was made! In the country of the Ruthenians, who lived under similar conditions, a girl market was held three times a year at Krasznibrod. Here the matter was settled even more rapidly. If the lad was attracted by a girl, he rushed up to her with the cry:

Pod do popa
kdi ti treba hlopa

and literally dragged her away. Not home though, but to the «popa» of the nearest monastery, where the priest immediately legalized this mild form of kidnapping. The Serbs, who had settled in the Southern parts of Hungary which the Turks had badly devastated, had a well known girl market in Zombor in October. Here the lads and the girls formed a large circle for the Kolo dance; a few pipers were hard at work in the middle, and relatives of the lads also stood in the centre. After a careful inspection the parents offered the girl of their choice an apple with a silver coin in it. If the girl accepted the apple, the engagement was made.

We mention the girl markets of Hungary, though they were not Hungarian in the sense that the people taking part in them were Hungarian. In very ancient times Hungarian girl markets must have existed, and in these probably very similar customs were fashionable, these however have not been preserved for us. In some parts the authorities stopped these gatherings, for instance the girl market of

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Photo : Hung. Nat. Mus. — S. Ébner

Girls at a fair with symbols of Our Lord's crucifixion

p 53 [p 54 is blank]

443 Krasznibrod has already been prohibited in the 18th century.
583 The name is practically all that has survived of the Hungarian girl markets, which to-day are, in reality, simple markets or fairs.

The memory of a Szekler girl market, which used to be accompanied by the ringing of angel bells, is still alive. The sound of the bells alone was angelic, the people who rang them were far from being snow white angels: they were black faced gipsies, who held a bell and cattle-bell market in the same place on the same day. Of course with the bells the gipsies also brought their violins and their pipes, so there was music and naturally fights as well, since no market or fair could be imagined without them. The authorities stopped this market too.

In olden times a Hungarian market lasted several days, sometimes quite two weeks, and the Sundays were called the «girl market days», as on those days everyone had time to go to the market; and go they did, especially the young people: the day never passed without dancing and amusements. There are certain Hungarian markets which in memory of old customs are called girl markets to this day.

443 Hungarian markets are generally counted as holidays.
527 Those who go to the market, dress in their most beautiful clothes, and in some places the mothers carry a whole wardrobe for their marrigeable daughters. The girls change several times a day, as a Matyó bride does at every new tune. At almost every Hungarian market there is a chophouse and an arbour, there is feasting, music, dancing and naturally acquaintances are made. Thus more or less every market, even every fair is at the same time a girl market.

443 In summer time the great cart camp of a market or a fair is a very interesting sight. The multitude of buyers and sellers or fair visitors spend their nights there, as the markets or the fairs last several days. Varied national costumes

443 from all over the country and the last heralds of some ancient profession can be seen at these gatherings. Such is the market on the ourtskirts of the town of Debrecen, which is called the «Freedom of the Hortobágy». Here we meet especially interesting characters of the great ancient Hungarian profession: pasturing. We can enjoy the kaleidoscopic vision of a great cattle market. It is staged on the ancient pasture, around us is endless plain, above us the sky, limitless like the sea, with the enticing waters of a Fata Morgana shimmering on the horizon...

Initiation of young men and the forming of long lasting friendships

881 Certain details in the initiation of young men remind one of guild customs. It is by no means impossible that the young peasants borrowed a few customs from the guilds. Certain things they imitated externally, and they also put their own «laws» into writing, in one place as early as 1702. These «laws» deal primarily with the obedience due to the leader of the young men, the «arbiter of the village», and with the rules of good manners. The strict rules of the guilds also extend to such matters, but their primary object is to guard themselves against bunglers, to further their own interests and to examine the knowledge of the person up for initiation. The society of farming lads has no such aims. Their initiation means no more than the recognition that someone has grown up; the appreciation of the fact that the boy has become a young man and that from then onwards he has a right to visit girls, take part in dances and have a share in all those things which are traditionally due

to a lad. It is quite obvious that the initiation of lads is merely the admission of their maturity. 881

The leader of the lads is an elected arbiter, who sees to it that the laws are observed. He conducts the initiation. Two lieutenants, a «master of the wine» and one «of the dance» are his attendants. It is the duty of the two lieutenants to invite the girls, to drive them to the site of the entertainment and back home after it. They are also responsible for the wine and the dancing.

Naturally the permission of the parents is also needed for the initiation of a lad. The initiation itself is performed with the «lad's belt» under the «lads' coat of arms». The «lad's belt» is handed down from generation to generation and is preserved with enormous care. The «lads' coat of arms» is a reaping wreath : it is woven from wheat, rye and oat ears and bound round with many bright ribbons. It hangs from the ceiling of the initiation room, which is usually the village inn or its dancing place. In some villages the local blacksmith forges the «coat of arms» from iron, in the shape of a crown. Onto this they hang the symbols of farming, — naturally made of iron — tiny sickles, scythes, pitchforks, rakes ; if the village goes in for fishing as well, then a boat is added to all these. The bright ribbons are not missing either. At the initiation ceremony those to be initiated stand on a bench, so that the «coat of arms» is just over their heads. The ceremony is very solemn, often there is a large gathering to watch it. The arbiter greets the village, the lads and the public present. After each little toast, he drinks a glass of wine according to prescribed rules, and so do the lads up for initiation. In one part of the country the initiation is always arranged on the morrow of a dance, and it is also followed by a dance. First there is a round dance, at the end of which a lad and a girl form a gate with raised arms, and all the others pass through it in

881 a long chain. After this there is ordinary dancing. In some districts the initiation is not as solemn as all this, and its date is always Childermas Day, that is the 28th of December. The lads first make the round of the girls' houses according to custom, and beat the maidens with willow whips. As a sign of gratitude, each beaten girl ties a ribbon one yard long to the whip. Finally the whip, with last year's ribbons on it, is tied onto the hoop of the coat of arms, and the new ribbons are hung on it too ! — This custom shows even more plainly the essence of the initiation of lads : the recognition of maturity is coupled with the beating of girls, the latter meaning the conjuring up of fertility. The whip, which is supposed to cause fertility, is united with the «lads' coat of arms».

This variation of the initiation of lads is still practiced in the Csallóköz and the Szigetköz, the districts of the Upper Danube.

In some places there exists a custom amongst the girls which is a little like the initiation. It is called «komálás» or «komaság». It usually occurs on the Sunday after Easter, for which reason this is called the «komáló» Sunday. «Koma» means in Hungarian friend, pal ; «komálás» is really the making of friends. The «komáló» girls send or bring each other «koma» plates, or in the dialect of another district «mátka» plates. The «koma» plate contains wine, two painted eggs, a cracknel : it is covered with a white napkin. In some villages they hand it to each other with a little verse :

I received a «koma» plate,
I covered it with gold,
A friend sends it to a friend,
The friend shall exchange it for friendship.

The «komaság» or «mátkaság» means a friendship lasting until the grave. «Friends, friends, let us be friends, for a hundred years and for ever !»

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Photo: Hung. Nat. Mus. — S. Ébner

Girl carrying a friend's basket

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The May-tree

527 The origin of the May-tree is explained by a charming
713 legend . . . When the apostles Philip and James were converting the Scythians and other pagan tribes, a devout virgin joined them and helped them to win over heathens to the true faith. Therefore the pagans slandered her badly and accused her of impurity. Hearing these accusations, the poor innocent virgin stuck her staff into the ground and, turning her face towards heaven, implored God to look upon her and give some sign proving her innocence. God heard her prayer, and lo ! green leaves and twigs shot out from the stick ! It is for this reason that at dawn on the two apostles day : on the first of May, the May-tree is set up. But Hungarian lads are not very likely to remember this. All they know about the May-tree is what their song says about it :

In front of my sweetheart's house
A tall tree has grown over night,
The wings of a soft wind
Wave a red kerchief in its branches . . .

527 The May-tree is a tall young tree ; its branches are
883 lopped off and only its crown is left, forming a green top. This leaf bouquet is decorated with ribbons and bright scarves. The tree does not grow by itself, as one is supposed to think according to the songs, but the lads set it up infront of the girls' houses. In some places, if the tree happens to be very small, it is stuck either onto the gate or onto the roof of the house. The Matyó lads have the custom to carry the tree as far as the gate ; but the girls set it up and decorate it. Here usually one or two bottles of wine find their way onto the tree ; in other places painted eggs are also hung upon it. As is the case with other customs, the date of setting up the May-tree has often been mixed

527 up with the habits of other important days. In some districts
883 it is set up at Easter.

May-trees are not distributed freely in every village. There are places in which only one common tree is set up in front of the church. In one village Whitsun habits have been mingled with the May-tree custom. On Whit-Monday the lads who set up the common May-tree accompany one of their number on horseback, who is covered with green leaves as is also his horse, to every house where there is a marriageable girl. Surrounding their leaf-covered companion in the middle of the courtyard, they ask for May-tree money, threatening that unless they get it, the horseman will gallop round the whole yard. This lad, clothed in green, reminds one of certain rain conjuring customs.

There exists that other custom as well, whereby the lads elect from amongst themselves a «sad king», who — like the Witsun queen — is not allowed to laugh while they make the round of the girls' houses. Just as at Easter, so now too they get presents. This «sad king» reminds one of the initiation ceremony of some primitive peoples . . . In a serious initiation the candidate must not show fright nor laugh at any joke.

527 As in customs connected with budding twigs in general,
[751] the May-tree may have had power to prevent illness and ward off evils, or it may have had a purifying effect in general. At least according to popular belief!

[713] The May-tree set up in front of the church is a symbol of the restraining and ennobling tendency of the Christian religion. The first of May is the day of the apostles Philip and James. The tree set up in front of the church recalls the miracle of the stick of the virgin, who went with them. As for getting rid of evils, it is well known that Saint Philip freed the town of Phrygia from a terrible man-eating serpent: — « . . . While he prayed the terrible snake died and the town was released . . . »

Setting up the Matyó May-tree Photo: R. Balogh

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Whitsuntide customs

527 177 The Hungarians came into their present lands more than a thousand years ago, and it was naturally here that they adopted Christianity and learnt all the terms of the Christian faith; often indeed they merely clothed with a new meaning the old expressions of their former pagan creed. The Hungarian name of Whitsun: «pünkösd», like its German synonym «Pfingsten», is derived either from the Latin «Dies Pentacostis», or the original Greek «Pentakosté» of the New Testament. The Hungarians did not call this feast after the rose as did their Slav neighbours, but its popular name is «Red Whitsun», and one of the favourite flowers in Hungarian gardens is the «Whitsun rose», that is the peony. As early as the 18th century a charming Hungarian folk song mentions Whitsun in connection with the rose:

You wern't born from a mother,
You have grown on a rosebush;
On Red Whitsun's day
You were born from a rose!

This fragment of a popular song undoubtedly formed part of the habitual Whitsun songs or the game known as «Whitsun's queen».

527 789 883 857 The fact that the Hungarian name of Whitsun is merely a thousand years old does not imply that the Hungarian game of having a Whitsun queen originates from a similar date. It is much older than human memory and is merely an adaptation of the feast of fertility and fertilization, celebrated at the time of nature's blossoming. It is a pagan tradition, which lives all over Europe in the Christian world, surreptitiously and almost entirely devoid

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527 of its real meaning. But everywhere it has its local colour,
789 its local bearing or its local peculiarities. According to
the simplest form of this custom, the older girls rig out
883 a little one in a white dress and carry her all over the
857 village. The child has a wreath on her head and her face
is covered by a veil. Thus they carry the mysterious little
queen from house to house, from yard to yard and, dancing
around her, they sing their charming song:

God has brought us
Red Whitsun's day,
We will carry around
Our little queen,
And the rose wreath of
Our little queen.
To young men we give
A bunch of sweet carnations,
To old men we give
A bottle of sweet wine,
To old women we give
A delicious dove pie.
I wasn't born from a mother
I have grown on a rosebush,
On Red Whitsun's day
I was born in the dawn, etc.

At the end of the song they lift the little queen by her arms with the cry: «let's lift the queen!» — She is usually a small girl of five or six and lifting her veil they say to the lady of the house: «May your hemp grow as high as this!» It is well known that amongst other things hemp is also the symbol of fertility. As the lifting of the Whitsun queen symbolizes a magic charm to ensure a good hemp harvest, so sitting her on the ground is supposed to prevent the hemp from growing. This is what the procession does if the hostess will not give the queen a warm reception, or will not allow her to enter the court-yard, or if having let her enter it, she puts nothing into the basket of the ladies-

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Whitsun queen Photo : R. Balogh

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189 in-waiting. The magic extends in some places to other
527 plants as well, in the following order:
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The queen's wand
Shall bring to this house
Wine, wheat and fruit.

Hemp is the symbol of fertility, and now-a-days the Whitsun feasters apply their magic primarily to an ample hemp harvest; but they also wish for abundant «wine, wheat and fruit», the main products of this little agricultural country. There is a close connection between the admittance of young men to manhood and this fertilizing magic; and we do find in the latter faint traces of an ancient initiation ceremony. Thus it is a rule that the queen's face must remain composed even if people lift her veil, laugh at her or tickle her. Very similar is the duty imposed on the «sad king», who has a part in the custom of setting up a May-tree: he is not allowed to laugh either. This same custom is prevalent in the initiation ceremonies of primitive people: the person who is being initiated is not allowed to show fright, nor must he laugh whatever the joke may be.

527 Very long ago the King of Whitsun probably appeared
883 with the little queen. Traces of this are found in one of
857 the Whitsun games on the Great Plain, where one of the bridesmaids has a kerchief around her head, as though she were a married woman, and another girl acts the part of the bridegroom. The song of these Whitsun celebrators refers also to a Hungarian royal wedding of the Árpád family, which occurred in 1211, the bride being no less a person than Saint Elisabeth of Hungary, who married a prince of Thuringia. She was the daughter of King Andrew II. of Hungary. We may well wonder why the children's custom preserved the memory of this great event. This is the song:

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What is to-day? What is to-day?
It is Red Whitsuns day;
To-morrow will be, to-morrow will be
Its second day, its second day.
Andrew is gallant and grand,
He is married and a good dancer;
Her husband is a rare lad,
While she is as good as gold.
Hold well, pull well
The bit of your horse,
It shan't trample, it shan't crush
Whitsun flowers, red peonies.
Whitsun's flower, the red peony
Leant over the main road,
The bride shall pick her up
And tie her into a wreath.

In this variation sung on the Great Plain Andrew alone is mentioned, but in another known in Transdanubia the queer, tottering lines of the ancient text speak of the princess as well.

My sister, my sister, my sister,
My Lady Saint Elisabeth,
I would willingly ransom you
If only I had a ransom.
Why did you give yourself
To someone else, to someone else?
I gave myself
To some one else,
God shall be kind to me,
Take care of me.

How did the Hungarian princess, sent as a bride to Thuringia at the age of four, find her way into the playful remnants of this ancient pagan custom? Perhaps through the legends woven about Elisabeth? The beautiful figure of Saint Elisabeth fitted perfectly into the Whitsun games, all mixed up with «Whitsun roses», since the alms meant for her poor had turned into roses in her lap. In other

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Photo : Hung. Nat. Mus. — S. Ébner

Calvinist Whitsun

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527 883 857 games played by the children at Whitsun, Saint Elisabeth stands on the drawbridge, facing the people who want to enter the castle; in the next stage they spy around the castle in order to find out whether there is a marriageable girl in it; they then sing about Elisabeth's «queenly qualities»; finally they kidnap her after the ancient manner of acquiring brides, and carry her off into a royal tent, made of silk.

Though learned research is not quite certain about the connection, it is undeniable that the ancient pagan «king of the spring» feasts have had their separate Hungarian development. We mention this merely as a proof of the existence of such local, in this case Hungarian, modifications.

577 883 While the rosy cheeks of the little Whitsun queen fit so beautifully the rosy mood of Red Whitsun's day, in a few places there are also Whitsun kings and Whitsun royal elections. The Hungarian proverb: «It lasts as long as a Whitsun kingdom» (meaning quickly passing glory) is derived from this custom. In many places Whitsun's kingdom resolves itself into the election of an arbiter of young men. Small wonder, considering that once the two meant the same thing. The Whitsun king is elected now-a-days, but at one time he had to win a competition to acquire such exalted rank; he had not merely a high position, but owned a royal throne! There was no literal throne, but he had the title of king, and Whitsun's king had power, exceptional rights and regalia. In Transdanubia the competition was often a race run on horseback. Usually the cleverest lad acquires his distinction by strength and shrewdness. Whitsun's Kingdom lasts for a year. It can only continue if in the next year's race Whitsun's King wins again. Otherwise the privileged position is gone, and so is power and the right to eat and drink at the expense of other lads! In one word the lovely dream — Whitsun's Kingdom — is over!

527 As it is now in this game, so is it with real kings in
883 the case of primitive people, and so was it probably with the ancient Hungarian leaders. The king was sent asleep, but into eternal sleep, as perhaps the Hungarians did with their leader Almos, who led them as far as this country. Almos in Hungarian means «sleepy». According to simple people death is only a kind of sleep; children have the same notion.

[773] The Hungarian peasant explains the election of the Whitsun king as «... the imitation of an old custom. Once upon a time the councillors of the country elected every year a new king on Whitsun's day; he was usually a shepherd boy. They gave him a sleeping draught, and they were wont to seat him on the throne in an unconscious state. But his power only lasted until the following Whitsun. Then he was put asleep in the same way and was sent back to his old place.»

In the case of many of the more primitive peoples real kingship is more or less a Whitsun kingdom — passing glory. It does not last until the king's life is over, in fact it ends when the people so decide, or when the king is conquered. Then he is set aside and a stronger man takes his place.

[881] A few of the old customs in use for the initiation of adolescents have found their way into the custom of Whitsun's kingdom. We have already referred to the fact that in one variation of the game a bridgeroom appears beside the queen, and that one ancient Hungarian royal marriage has also been mixed up in it.

883 Serious ancient customs or habits are thus turned in
857 the course of time into childish games, bearing faint marks
527 of old memories. A thousand years ago the Hungarians brought terrifying new war tactics into Europe, and pious Western friars added to their prayers: «From the arrows

of the Hungarians Good Lord deliver us !» These terrifying arrows have also become children's toys in our days... Two worlds preserved the things men used in ancient time: the world of primitive people and the world of children. In these two worlds the King of Whitsun lives. In one quite seriously, in the other only as a game. 527 883 857

In some parts of the country merely the name «little queen of Whitsun» is still alive, but her four companions, who represent the four evangelists, bear no trace of pagan influence. The first mentions a lion, the second an angel, the third a lamb: the symbols of the evangelists. The fourth ought to mention the eagle, but he only refers to the regal bird's empire of the clouds in the air, and in a way which almost suggests rain conjuring:

Oh wine, dear wine,
Has no cloud been this way?
A cloud shall come this way
From the lofty sky!

A veil however covers the face of the little queen according to ancient custom . . .

The feast of wheat

«Wheat, wine, peace and a good looking wife !» — Thus does the Hungarian man summarize the collection of wishes he expects life to fulfil for him, — or which he wants to gain in his fight with Fate. The wine of Tokaj, Eger, Badacsony, Somlyó, the bread and festive cakes of the Tisza district, stay in the memory of the person who has once tasted them. Did we wish to express the longing for these things in a popular form, we would say: 252

Whoever has drunk the water of the Tisza,
Always longs to come back to it!

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252 The water of the Tisza is naturally merely a symbol behind which lurks the delicious magic of the famous and hereditary Hungarian cooking and the science of a good vintage.

According to a proverb: «Poor people cook with water», or in other words, thus does the Hungarian land distribute its products:

Beans and peas for the peasant,
Lucious venison for the lords...

Undoubtedly not all Hungarians live in the same way, though Hungarian «lords» have also learnt to do without venison in these unending lean years. But it is certain that even the Hungarian poor, especially the inhabitants of the Great Plain, were always very particular about their bread; and to this day they use a characteristic proverb aimed at the poorer, or perhaps merely more thrifty or more frugal people:

They have everything, like Árpád,
Except bread and bacon.

If the extent of any knowledge is to be measured by the number of technical terms in use, then the science of Hungarian wheat growing and bread baking must be on an extraordinarily high level. The farmer tells the miller how he is to mill his pure wheat: he is to make it *soft, sharp, flaming, sieve like,* with *small pollard,* or with *rough pollard.* All these are special technical varieties which not only the miller but every peasant woman knows When a sewing girl or a barber's assistant hurries his or her companions and asks that the «thing be done like rough pollard», it means that it shall be done very quickly, in the same sort of hurry as a mill working in a rough way,

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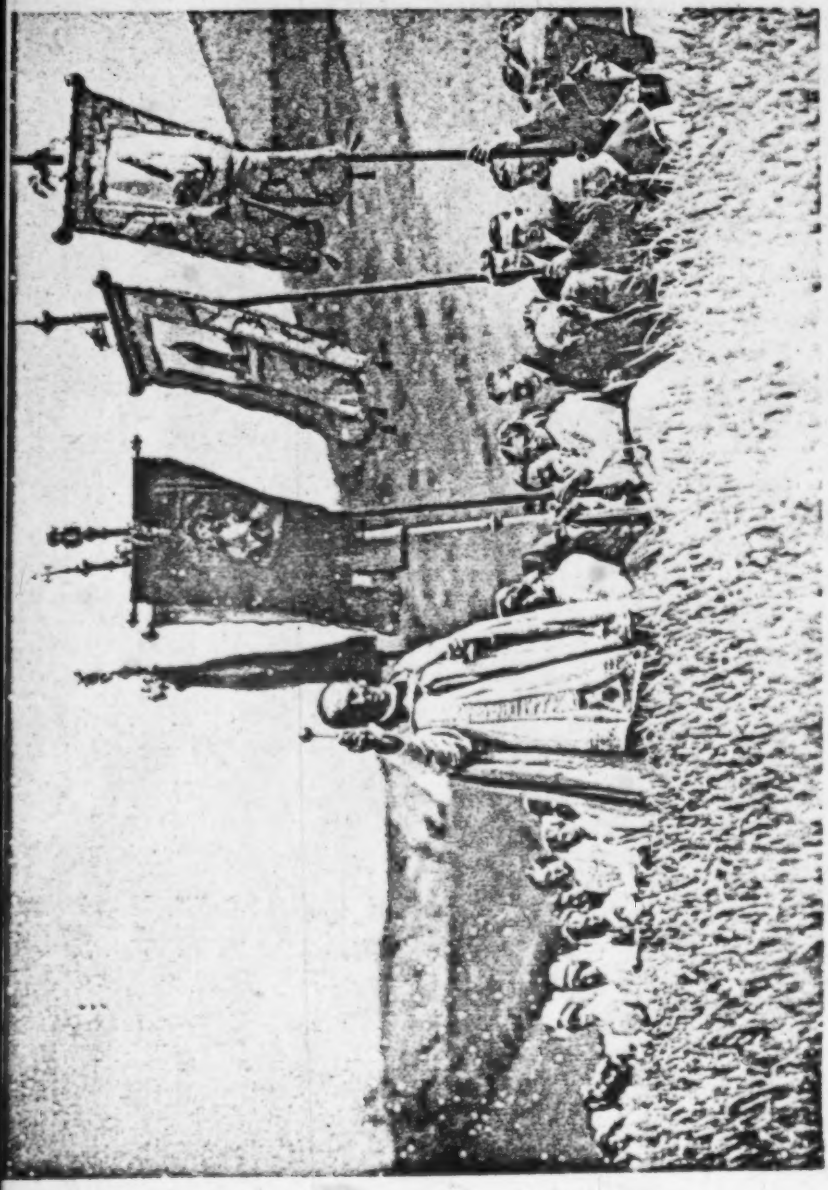

Photo : R. Balogh 000

Blessing of the wheat crop

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252 A number of petty technical terms indicate the right procedure for kneading, its right or wrong result: similarly every step in heating the oven, the reason for it and how far it should go is also accurately expressed, no less than the successful or bad result of the bread itself. Good bread is: bloated, loose, smart, it must be full of blisters! If it is no good, then it must suffer from one of the following defects: either it is *flat*, *notty*, *sticky*, *pasty*, *doughy*, *torn*, *stodgy* or *heavy*. The woman who cannot bake bread deserves to be laughed at even by her lawful husband, and is derided in this song:

She can bake fine bread:
Twice she puts leaven into it!

She kneads it five-six times,
Yet forms it into loaves while unleavened!

She makes five-six fires in the stove,
Yet she takes it out unleavened!

Oh dear, dear, dear, oh dear me,
Until the end of my life I'll be sorry...
Why on earth did I ever get married!

It would be even worse if we were to quote all the technical terms referring to cakes which on account of their varied appetizing forms are known all over the country. These terms would make up a whole dictionary which could not possibly be translated into another language, just like the many expressions concerning the pastry which can be cooked into a soup or boiled separately. We shall merely mention «snail pastry» which is cooked with the wedding chicken soup, because the implements with which it is made are worth noticing in connection with Hungarian popular art. Friends, relations, companions, all come together to make the enormous amount of «snail pastry»

252 required, and each person brings his or her own implement. They cannot turn up with any odd one in such a gathering, so each person brings proudly a decorated one, just as girls only take to the spinnery the distaffs which their lovers have so beautifully carved.

773 The great importance and distinction of bread makes it necessary that it shall be duly honoured when still in the form of wheat, all the more so as the Creator himself carved man's face on every ripe grain. According to a Legend, when God had turned man out of the Garden of Eden, he ordered him to search for the grain bearing his image, to grow it and work for it with the sweat of his brow, «because, although he had heard that it would mean death, he forgot and ate of the forbidden fruit».

788 The blessing of the wheat crop by the Church, which takes place on the day of Saint Mark, has therefore a great importance and meaning in Hungarian life. It is at the end of April, there is hope of life and the young crops are green like untouched promises. The people go in procession to the chosen wheat field where, under God's free sky, the future bread is blessed. Each person returns to his home with one ear from the field which has been blessed, — with a promise of new hope. It is blessed, so that fog shall not strangle, hail shall not destroy, storm shall not trample, fire shall not consume the only hope of the poor». Later on the Calvinists at their communion thank God with fresh bread for having watched the growth of the crops. In some districts ears picked from the blessed field are supposed to have a healing, increasing or magic effect, and therefore they are greatly esteemed.

241 But let us get down to work! It is Peter and Paul's
527 day, the stalk of the wheat is torn, and when the wind touches it, it undulates in golden waves. Poor people do the reaping themselves, helped by their family. Those

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Photo: Hung. Nat. Mus. — S. Ébner

Handing over the reaping wreath

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241 who cannot manage all the work themselves engage reapers
527 and in some places make agreements with their workers as early as the New Year. Or in ancient fashion the owner counts on the help of his friends and the assistance of kind people who help all those in trouble. Of course one kindness deserves another: while working the reapers often rest; though their's is no real rest, because during that time they dance a few turns, and not only for the dance, but even for the work, the gipsy band plays gaily! Now-a-days this only happens in Transylvania, as the advance of time has modernized this work too: it has become quick, hurried, businesslike, mechanized. The poor people, who have very little land or grow very little wheat, organize themselves into reaping bands, who look for work and go
527 to the bigger estates to do the reaping. In the parts of the country where the love of tradition has not completely died out we can still see very old, amusing and gay reaping customs. — When the landowner appears for the first time near the reaping ground the reaping girls and women meet him and tie him up with a straw rope. He is only released for a ransom! All over the country the feast which celebrates the end of the reaping has given rise to many customs. At the reaping we meet straw wreaths and peculiarly shaped, beautifully arranged wheat bouquets. In most places only the sons and daughters of the farmer, or his servants, bind the wreath according to ancient custom and attach it to the frame of a mirror or a picture if it is square, or hang it on a cross-beam if it is round.

In Transylvanian Calvinist churches it is the custom to make a biggish wheat wreath on the occasion of taking new bread. It hangs from the ceiling just over the Lord's table until next year's new bread.

In certain places it is still the custom to carry the reaping wreath ceremoniously home to the farmer. The

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527 reapers go through the village to the farmer's house singing, dancing and accompanied by music. Girls dressed in white, or into their best clothes, carry the wreath. In olden times bigger wreaths were fashionable than those of to-day, and they were carried on a pole from the fields to the farmer's house. In some districts the most beautiful girl of the village is crowned with wheat ears, or the wreath is stuck on the end of a long pole. In many places, especially in Transylvania, it is still customary to wait in every gate for the crowned lad or girl with a pail of water, and to throw it at them — possibly into their face — to ensure a rich harvest for the next year. When they reach home, the same shower greets them from the farmer and each member of his household. Preparations for this are all the simpler, as the reapers approach noisily, singing and sometimes even accompanied by music. At the farmer's house there is then a big meal, perhaps dancing as well, as a due end to the great, important work. There are places where on their arrival they greet the farmer with a poem, and then hang the wreath in its accustomed place. There it hangs, revered by all, until the next harvest. This is a poem invented for such an occasion in the Palóc country:

Harvest time is over,
And our gracious lord has now turned to us.
We come to meet him in great haste,
We have bound a fragrant wreath to please him.
We have tied the wreath of lovely wheat ears
And beautiful garden and field flowers.
We brought this to our lord,
To join with his thanksgiving for the harvest.
May God keep him in good health and strength,
For many, many long years.
May God allow our master to live long,
May he and his lady live like a pair of doves.
The name of Jesus Christ shall be praised.

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The reaping wreath Photo : R. Balogh

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262 We must not forget the custom of presenting the reapers with cakes; the extraordinary cakes made for the occasion and the particular and renowned cakes of certain towns. The most beautiful festive presents, exchanged at fairs and fashionable in towns, are the ginger breads, which are ornamented, beautifully shaped, coloured and sometimes are not merely the symbols of love, but also express it by means of the eloquent verses stuck on them. This is a very interesting section of Hungarian popular art, well worthy of study. They are shaped by means of a wooden mould. Thus are moulded charming babes, beautifully harnessed horses, grand carriages, swords, pistols, fine ladies, slim girls, terrifying bandits, elegant hussars, Turkish pashas, hearts, bouquets of flowers, so that each person may get what his heart most desires. The boy receives the sword, the young minx the young man in a top hat, the longing heart another heart made of ginger bread or a bouquet of flowers.

Amongst the cakes we should mention the multitude of wedding cakes and biscuits, the most interesting of all being the cock and hen of sugar cake made in Boldog which is placed in front of the bridegroom and the bride. This is a more refined form of the custom, prevalent in other districts, whereby a live cock and hen is the due of the young couple.

As befits one of the first corn growing countries of Europe, other specialities are: the rolls of Pozsony, the flead cakes of Torda and the Szekler country, the cracknels of Debrecen, and on top of a long list of similar things figure the pastries of Budapest, the various puddings and turnover pies; sweet cakes, doughnuts and fritters.

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Saint Ivan's fire

527 It is very strange that the Hungarian people refer to one of Saint John's days as «Saint Ivan's day». Saint Ivan's day is on the 24th of June, that is on the day of the summer solstice; at the time when Hungarian wheat, Saint Ivan's apples and cherries ripen; in midst of the season of white bread, green apples and red cherries. It is, as it were the symbol of ripening in the sun's rays, of the quick increase of celestial warmth and human passion. Perhaps once upon a time it was the natural summer feast of love, which is fated to recur only periodically. The sun's fire flamed, and from its flames fires were lit in human hearts. It was the great human feast of the heavenly fire which had struck the earth: no, not Saint Ivan's day... but the summer solstice. For innumerable thousands of years men celebrated this feast, first perhaps merely instinctively, later on as the feast of a wonderful phenomenon of the heavens... Many, many thousands of years later there appeared on the earth a previously unknown power: — the Church, and with admirable adaptation it transmuted the feast of the heavenly and earthly fire into the feast of the Burning Tongues (Whitsun). It surrounded the ancient fire with the thorny hedge of its laws, just as it tried to eliminate from practice and memory the winter solstice feast of pagan sun-worship by fixing the birthday of the Founder of the Church instead of that of the sun god on the 25th of December.

But a couple of thousand years are not sufficient to extinguish feasts dictated by nature. Though the original meaning of ancient pagan feasts gradually became obliterated, and their ceremonies circumscribed, they did not altogether fade from human tradition. Human memory is,

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in a sense, like the geological layers of the earth. In both the remnants and memories of a more ancient life are preserved. Still . . . there is one difference between them. The remnants of life buried in the earth are immobile, dead and petrified, whilst the ancient layers of human culture stir during the hours dedicated to their memory . . . In words, poems, music and mimicry they come to life and bear testimony to human life as it existed thousands of years ago. 527

The day on which the calendar of the Church fixed Saint Ivan's day used to be the feast of love in the calendar of ancient man. The ancient pagan feast, which co-incides with the Christian feast of Pentecost, is the feast of the internal fire which burns for ever in man. The symbolic feast of this internal fire is preserved by many traditions and superstitions. This is one of the simplest: a tall tree trunk is set up on top of the nearest hill, or a suitable tree is chosen for the occasion; a number of old baskets are placed on it, and a girl's wreath is laid on top of them. When this is done, the tree is set on fire at sunset. Sometimes a number of Saint Ivan's fires flame up at a smaller or greater distance from each other. If the wreath also catches fire, it is a good sign: its owner will soon get married . . . This form of the custom is merely a small fragment of the ancient fire feast. We can find this feast nowhere in its complete form, as the teachings and practice of a new moral conception naturally strove with all their vigour to eradicate this most pagan memory of paganism, and they have been really successful in doing so. This ancient solstice feast has been erased to such an extent that it can only be redrawn with very pale lines, its contours alone can be indicated.

The other Hungarian name of Saint Ivan — Flowery Saint John — also suggests something. — Why flowery?

527
782 Where the custom of making a fire on Saint Ivan's day is still prevalent in a more complete form, the lads and the girls set on fire at sunset straw pyres mixed with fragrant herbs. The fire is laid on a square place. The ceremony is long, and some people — perhaps the old, perhaps those whose turn comes late — will find it boring . . . It is as long as the song of Saint Ivan's night . . .

But let us go nearer to the game. It is just beginning, as the song — the song of Saint Ivan — says :

We lay his fire,
We lay it on a square ;
In one of its corners
Sit good looking old men,
In its second corner
Sit good looking old women,
In its third corner
Sit good looking young lads,
In its fourth corner
Sit beautiful young girls.

Everyone is placed in his or her traditional place, in the four corners of the world sit the four groups of people ; each bunch gathered according to age and sex. Saint Ivan's fire is not burning yet . . . It is just being laid . . . Then the charming of the young couples begins, they are «sung together», so that in the words of the minstrels, they shall be «spun and woven» together with the blessing of the common song, that is public opinion . . . The song links each boy with a girl, calling them out in couples in due order and with full names :

Whose horses are over there
Under the great mountains?
There indeed I can see
The horses of (Stephen Nagy).
(Anne Kiss) return me my horses
I will also return you
Your geese.

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When every couple has been charmed and «sung together» with the magic song, then Saint Ivan's square fire is also lit beside the flaming fire of love! The fragrant fire of the flowery saint is lit amidst this song: 527 782

Flowery Saint John,
Your night is light;
While I am before you
I'll honour you;
Keep light so long
And be dark after that.

It is possible that the memory of the cult of the two fires, the heavenly and the human fire, is lurking in this verse. Now comes a ceremony of a strange purifying nature, which once upon a time may have even implied human sacrifice to the sun or to the fire. This can be guessed from the following verse of the song, though of course these hypotheses have to be handled with great caution:

(Stephen Nagy's) stone house should be set on fire.
Let us put it out! Let us put it out!
We must not desert the poor wretches!
(Anne Kiss') stone house should be set on fire.
Let us put it out! Let us put it out!
We must not desert the poor wretches!

That the festive fire was a sacrifice as well as a ceremony we infer not only from the fragrant herbs which are mixed with the straw, but from the fact that in certain places the girls go to the fire in a procession with flower wreathes, and that they throw the first-fruits of spring, — apples and cherries, — into the fire. In a subsequent part of the song one can infer from the word *Rutafa* that this plant also played an important part in the ceremony. This plant is the Artemisia Abrotanum L., and Hungarians call one of its varieties Saint John's herb, Artemisia vulgaris. The former is the symbol of virginal purity. Anyhow

527 the «ruta» is a famous herb, one ancient record refers to Anyhow
782 it in connection with frankincense; according to another
[824] it sharpens the eye-sight, according to a third snakes hate its smell, — just as the devils hate that of frankincense. Once upon a time human beings were sacrificed, but later on only the symbol of virginal purity was offered up to the summer sun, just as on the Hungarian Ducking Monday girls were once really thrown into the water, whereas later on they were merely made soaking wet at the well. Later still, one bucket of water was enough, while to-day merely a few drops of scent represent the once drastic custom of Ducking Monday... Thus both a custom and a ceremony, which in olden times were serious and solemn, have become senseless games.

527 But let us continue with the thread of the song. Now comes the catharsis, the purifying part of the ceremony, when the young couples jump over the square fire, which flames to the four points of the compass. According to the test imposed by the song, they jump in couples and the magic song continues:

The «ruta» tree is tall
And it has many branches,
It has even leant over
The great sea.

One of its branches
Leant over the yard of (Paul Nagy)
Onto (Stephen Nagy)
Whose hair is silky but mouse coloured.

Its other branch leant
Over the yard of (Paul Kiss)
Onto (Anne Kiss)
Whose hair is silky but mouse coloured.
(Anne Kiss, Anne Kiss)
With the mouse coloured silken hair
Wears a crown of pearls on her hair.

Thus the symbolic plant of purity, the «ruta», leans 527
towards two love stricken hearts. The next part of the song praises the virgins, it is a «flower song» in the original sense of the word. Those who believe in the tenacity or the stubbornness of popular customs, may regard the end of this verse as a confession of pagan faith, when the pansy, the flower of love, is victorious over the flower which gives the bread and wine of the Gospel :

Three flowers were competing with each other,
My flower, I'll go with you,
My flower, I shall not leave you.

The beautiful Wheat flower speaks proud words :
«Do not compete with me, you lovely Wine flower,
The whole world lives on me, indeed on me»
My flower, I'll go with you,
My flower, I shall not leave you.

The beautiful Wine flower speaks proud words :
«Do not compete with me you lovely Wheat flower,
Because holy mass is served with me, indeed with me».
My flower I'll go with you,
My flower I shall not leave you.

The beautiful Pansy, loveliest of flowers, speaks proud words,
«Do not compete with me lovely Wine and Wheat flowers,
Because with me all the fine girls parade !»
My flower, I'll go with you,
My flower, I shall not leave you.

It is perhaps at this point that we see the last flash of this ancient ceremony. The chorus, maybe only that of the good looking old men and good looking old women, call for greater reticence :

Rejoice, but more slowly, my dear young ones,
That Mary may sleep until dawn,
Golden haired Mary, move the sun lower,
Bring down the moon to where the sun goes down,
The sun goes down in Mary.

527 It is obvious that certain teachings of the new church were mingled with this part, and that is the reason why it is so unintelligible. Only one thing is certain: the whole atmosphere calms down. The rest is sung only by the choir of the lovers:

Bend, my love, bend
The twigs of the cherry tree,
That I may pluck the best,
The sweetest for my lover,
The roundest for myself.
When the nut gets ripe,
Its leaves fall off,
Nuts, walnuts crack
Under the dry leaves!

[824] These lines symbolise the last event of the feast of mating. The cherry is the symbol of the ripeness of love, and the nut is the symbol of mating not only here but in Hungarian folk-lore in general. The plum has a similar meaning. Instead of going into a full explanation of this verse, it is quite sufficient to quote a few popular songs:

The cracking cherries are ripening,
Luck is turning to the girls,
The cherry is ripening, its leaves are turning yellow,
One little girl is heartbroken because she has no lover!

Spurs are clinking and clanking,
Nuts are asked from the bride,
The bride shall give them to him:
They shall not clink, they shall not clank so much.

By every single window
A couple of nut trees are standing,
Only before my window
There stands a solitary tree.

The day of Saint Ivan is a mating feast, its ritual and aim are fully explained by the symbolic verses of the above songs. But many other customs are also connected with this day and the more famous were thus summed up by a learned Transylvanian Calvinist priest, Peter Bod (1712—1767): — «These were the things they used to do on that day: 1. The children collected all kinds of rubbish and bones in order to burn them and make a great smoke, the reason being that the pagans used to make fires about that time around the wells, so that snakes should not multiply in their neighbourhood, as usually happens about the day of Saint John. The Christians, in their ignorance, made fires about that same time and leapt over them, wishing that all their sadness might get burnt. — 2. They carried hot embers along the boundaries of their land, hoping that the harvest of the fields would thus be blessed. — 3. In some places they rolled wheels on that day, meaning that the sun had already reached the top of the horizon, and that everything was on the eve of change.»

We have already said what an effective drug the «ruta», mentioned in the song, proved against snakes, and we added that in an old Hungarian chronicle it was classed with frankincense. All the customs grouped on this day have also a purifying tendency.

According to a record of the second half of the last century, «they seek to drive away dragons and devils with the fragrant herbs thrown into the fire, so that harmful tempests shall not destroy the young crops, and the wells and springs shall not get poisoned. In some places, to this end they make evil smelling smoke by burning bones, dust and all kinds of rags, as though they wanted to drive away devils. Others make a fire on the edge of the crops and walk around them with hot embers. Others again lay a big fire at the end of a forest or at the foot of a hill, and sing

[i.e. Hungarian peasants celebrating St Ivan's Day — Analyst]

527 and dance around it. Then they carry hot embers to the
789 houses, and put them in the gardens, so that caterpillars shall not destroy the fruit, or else they put them in the middle of the seeds so that the crops shall not be blasted, etc. From the way girls jump over Saint Ivan's fire their married future can be foretold.»

527 To this day all these small and fragmentary customs and superstitions are practiced to a great extent, but their full enumeration would be lengthy and uninteresting, like Saint Ivan's song. We do not want to take up the reader's time with that. It is enough to know that these little customs on the whole are either meant to purify, or else they are the fragments of the once extensive, but since continually declining mating feast. But we must draw attention to one more thing: the ancient rolling of the wheel. The wheel — according to the learned record of olden times, — represents the Sun when it «reaches the highest point of the horizon». Another custom, preserved in a few places, whereby the wheel is bound round with straw and, when lit, is rolled down a hill, is even more explicit in its symbolic meaning. If we remember that the oldest wheels had no spokes, but that the next slightly improved ones already had four spokes, we can notice the connection between the burning sun wheel and the square fire of Saint Ivan around which the spectators sat in four groups, separated for four different reasons.

It is certain that what ever belief or superstition (the two are alike in their essense) determined the development of different purifying customs, the summer solstice, that is Saint Ivan's day, the feast of flowery Saint John, was first and foremost the feast of mating and of love. In the song itself these two things alone are of importance. Faith and tradition were only concerned with this aspect of the day, they tried to preserve it and perpetuate its memory

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with poems and tunes. What is most vital on this day is thus summarized in a Transdanubian fragment: 527

The mahaleb cherry is ripe,
Its twigs are very bent,
There is a young woman amidst its leaves,
Hug the one you love best.
I hug and kiss this one
On Saint Ivan's hill, on its summit,
God shall give us a slow rain
Wash these two together,
Like two golden twigs.

The Matyó Wedding

It is a pious belief that marriages are made in Heaven. 581
As we are told to believe this, let us do so; we shall have 101
time to see with our own eyes when we enter the realm of eternal light . . . The Matyó tribe are very religious and are a group of the Hungarian people who live according to a very severe moral code. (The inhabitants of the County of Borsod, who live in the villages of *Mezőkövesd*, *Tard* and *Szentistván*, all close to the town of Miskolc, are called Matyó people.) They believe that marriages are made in Heaven, but not in the sense in which novelists in general are wont to think, namely that a mysterious force, Love, draws the couple to each other. There is no question of this. Amongst the Matyós a love match is a rara avis indeed, of course the Matyós fall in love like everyone else: the earthly bonds of marriage however are spun not by love, but by their parents.

The Matyó lad, like any other, can visit the lady of 584
his heart, whereever she may happen to live — every single evening if he choses to do so — but a wife approved by

584 his parents he can only seek in his own street. The street is populated by his closest relations and kinsmen; so
582 marriage is limited to the strictest endogamy: every one may seek his or her «happiness» only in their tribe or clan . . .

That the visits of the infatuated Matyó lad should overstep the very strict moral limits imposed by custom is practically an unknown occurrence . . .

Becoming acquainted is extremely easy. In the evening the lads, alone or in a group, may enter any house where there is an unmarried girl, whether the people known him or not. When he goes in, he does not say his name, nor does he ask that of the girl. But before he enters the house, he knocks at the window and says: — «I wish you a very good evening!» — The mother's answer to this is: — «The same to you!» — Then the youth says: — «Your daughter shall give me a match!» — The girl then comes into the dark courtyard without a word and strikes the match. The lad lights his cigarette or pipe from it, asking the girl: — «How are you beautiful girl, I hope you are not engaged yet?» — That is merely a traditional question, as if the girl were already engaged, the mother would have warned him by thus answering his knock on the window: «The match has already been struck!»

On an evening each lad visits eight to ten houses where there are unmarried girls. The girl accompanies each lad into the courtyard, but she cannot stay long out with him, as one of those left behind in the room soon shouts after her: — «Listen, I haven't come to visit your mother!» — Thus the lad makes his little round every night; of course only after all the outdoor work has been finished, that is from the autumn to the spring. — Next morning the parents crossexamine the lad and he confesses whatever he likes . . . His secretiveness is of little avail to him, as his parents tell him very categorically whom

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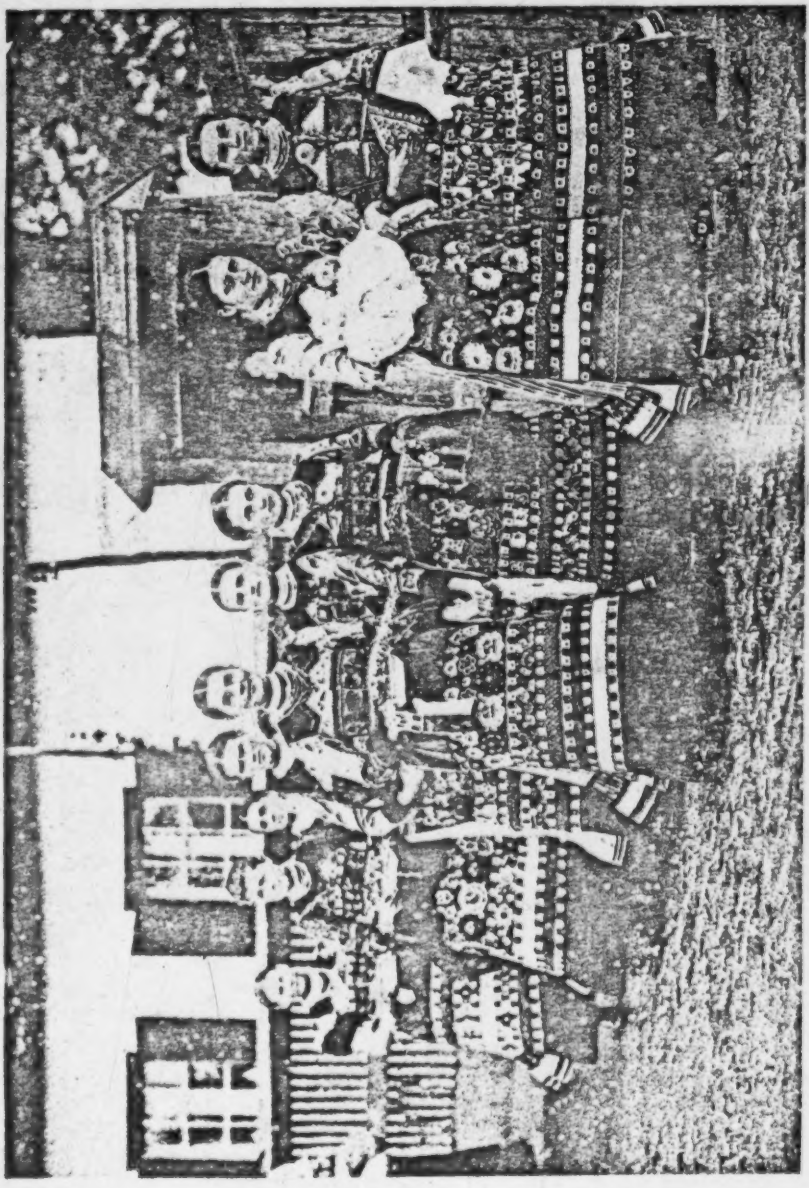

Girls carrying the engagement shirt and the rosemaries Photo : R. Balogh

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584 he may visit with «serious» intentions. Whether he likes her or not, — he may marry only that girl whom his parents like! If the boy disapproves of his parents' taste he can declare that he will not marry just yet, thereby merely expressing the hope that perhaps in the meantime the girl in question will be tied to some other person with the «heavenly» bonds...

[581] Beauty does not count, the financial situation alone is of any importance. If the girl is ugly, which is fairly rare amongst the good looking Matyós, there is the standing formula of consolation: — «Look at her my son, she has a great patch on her skirt!» — The great patch means a great strip of land...

When the boy has been persuaded and has given in, a woman is sent to the girl's family as an emissary to take soundings... If the thing is all right, the boy presents himself in the evening. — «Well, did you think of something?» — he asks the girl in the courtyard. — «My mother knows all about it», — is her answer. — «Well, godmother, will you let your daughter marry me?» — is [576] the question he asks the mother: as Matyó lads call every woman «godmother», whether they know her or not, unless she is a relation or a neighbour.

[592] The girl gives her young man an «engagement apron». Its colour is black and its bottom is embroidered with glorious bright embroidery: it is a masterpiece of Hungarian art! Otherwise it is forbidden to show affection either then, or during the whole time of marriage: in Matyó eyes that is a great disgrace even in the fortunate case where the young people actually happen to be in love with each other. The betrothed also gets a shirt, another masterpiece of the Matyó art of embroidering; done with red and blue threads. On an agreed date the young man is dressed in his engagement shirt and apron. About mid-

584 night he slinks home, so that if possible no one shall see him. To be seen would also be a disgrace. He gets two plates as well, on one there is a fattened duck, a stuffed chicken, a tart, cigarettes, apples, nuts and gingerbread; on the other old fashioned sweets. The lad carries the apron, a relation of the girl's the plates. On top of all this the lad also gets 40 to 50 pengő: that is the «apron money». He even gets a rosemary covered with gold dust as a bridegroom's bouquet. This usually happens on a Saturday. Next day he goes to church in his new apron and with the bridegroom's bouquet in his hat. Everyone can see what he is up to... Yet he will not even tell the name of his fiancée, in vain do his friends bombard him with questions... He does not even glance at his bride... Even that would be a disgrace... But in the afternoon he has a bachelor party, paying for the drinks with the «apron money» and in the evening the newly fledged bridegroom takes his bachelor friends to see his fiancée; and she offers the guests apples and nuts.

585 The engagement lasts one or two months. In olden times the wedding lasted about three weeks, now-a-days it is all over in a day. The whole «lot», that is to say the whole clan, is invited to the wedding. Three carts usually take the bride's trousseau; if she is poor, one cart is sufficient. A well to-do girl gets besides the furniture 18 pillows, nine with linen and nine with silk covers, three mattresses, one cider down, five richly embroidered sheets, three bed covers, thirty shirts, twenty-seven «testalló»-s (peculiar kind of blouses), 12 silk kerchiefs, 12 scarves, 18 skirts, 9 ordinary and 7 grand aprons, 4 frilled petticoats, 15 warm scarves and one dress for baking bread. This is her due from her parents. In old times she got from her fiancé a pair of red boots, now she gets a pair of shoes instead, a silken kerchief and a wedding

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Loading up the «bed» of a Matyó bride Photo : R. Balogh

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585 ring at the marriage ceremony. Every member of the clan is asked to the wedding. There are no «professional» best men and witnesses as in some places in Hungary; these offices are distributed amongst the relations; and for this reason Matyó weddings are not so burdened with poetry invented for the occasion as other weddings are.

In the morning the bridegroom's carts go to fetch the «bed» which means the whole trousseau. This name is by no means meant to suggest that the bed plays an important part in a Matyó wedding. That would be a really serious disgrace in Matyó eyes! In the meantime the «bouquet girls» arrive at the bridegroom's house, bringing the bridegroom's marriage shirt and bouquet. They are the envoys of the bride. Their number is the same as that of the Muses: there are nine of them. Each holds a plate in her hand and on the plate are five or six bunches of rosemary. The bridegroom's mother takes over the flowers and the bridegroom then distributes them amongst the lads. He sticks one in his hat and so do the others. The band, near at hand, starts playing, and the lads dance a few turns with the bouquet girls, giving their rosemaries a little shake... The girls have brought two bridegroom shirts, one for the marriage ceremony, the other for the wedding entertainment. Both the bridegroom and the bride must say farewell to their parents house. Everybody cries profusely, especially at the bride's house. If the bride does not cry bitterly, that is another disgrace... They cry and wail as though they were taking leave of the dead!

The bride's wedding guests are at her house, those of the bridegroom are at his. The bridegroom sends to fetch the bride: his best man, his two witnesses, two «brides women», two bridesmaids... They bring the engagement scarf, shoes and kerchief. The party are offered chicken made up with sweet pepper... The men eat it,

585 but for the women to have more than a bite would be yet another disgrace; they just taste the spicy dish. Then they start bargaining at great length for the bride, who cannot be taken away as simply as all that. She has to be bought! According to the Hungarian saying the girl is «for sale» and the original meaning of «vőlegény» — the Hungarian for bridegroom — is «buying man». After long arguments it seems as though the deal were not going to succeed and the bridegroom's envoys get up, according to ancient custom, to start on their way back... Of course they then speedily reach an agreement, as the whole quarrel is merely a picturesque custom, designed to show that a girl should not rush into marriage... The fictitious price is now-a-days about 50 pengő... The bride, who led the negociations, then allows the «bed» to be loaded on to the cart. The cart which carries the «bed», the horses, and even the harness are adorned with flowers, sometimes they tie cracknels into the bridle.

When they make the «bed» on the cart, some one throws a broken pot against the cart wheel with the wish: «may this married couple part when this broken potsherd grows together». They do not drive straight to their destination with the loaded cart; it is customary to make a wide détour through the village, so that every one shall see the trousseau. Little bells tied to the harness attract attention from street to street.

Then follows the dressing of the bride, her final fare well, when she has to kiss everybody and everyone kisses her. The «wedding queen» is shaken by loud sobs... Not to cry would be very unseemly! When the church ceremony of marriage has been celebrated and the party reaches the bridegroom's house, the bride's mother-in-law receives her with sugar: — «God brought you to us! May your life be as sweet as this sugar!» — and handing

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Photo : Hung. Nat. Mus. — S. Ébner

The best man makes a farewell speech for the bride

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585 the bride the sweet, she leads her into the house by the hand. Dancing follows at once... Then both the bride and the bridegroom change at the house of some neighbour. Then another dance and the bride changes her clothes again. Each time the band starts a new dance, the bride changes her clothes... Only those invited may take part in the dance, but outside the gate stands a whole crowd of beautifully dressed marriegeable girls, who have not been invited, but hope to get in. If one of the lads, who has been invited, signs to one of the girls, — a mere wink is sufficient — she goes in and takes part in the dance...

In the evening, after a series of ceremonial customs have been performed, comes the banquet. To this the whole household of the bride's family, which in Hungarian is called «hérész», is also asked. They come along provided with all kinds of good things, with sweets and the inevitable symbolic nuts and apples. Last of all walks the bride's mother, who brings a stuffed chicken and a bottle of very sweet wine. The bridegroom with his best man and the bride with her brides-maids, all holding burning candles in their hands, receive the «hérész» on the porch. All the good food they bring is put into the loft, — the place designated for the wedding night.

[262] This is the menu of the banquet: noodle soup with chicken and beef, after that cabbage with mutton or pork, after that some milky dish and lastly some kind of sausage. Of course there is plenty of wine. Appetites are excellent and spirits rise. Everyone eats freely, only the bride and the bridegroom are not allowed to touch anything. It would be a great disgrace to eat, although, poor things, they are already faint with hunger...

After the supper the new couple and the «bride's women» and brides-maids, who have been waiting at table,

585 go up into the loft, and now it is their turn to eat the food brought by the «hérész» — of course with the exception of the bride, for whom to confess hunger would be a great disgrace! After much persuasion she eats perhaps one nut... (We explain the meaning of nuts in the chapter «The fire of Saint Ivan».)*

After midnight the «hérész» goes home and the bridegroom's guests stay behind. The bride and bridegroom go with the «hérész» and at her parent's house the bride's hair is put up. The best man brings out the bride, the bridegroom accepts her and kisses her. The gipsy band begins to play, and the party to dance... About 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning the famous «red pepper» chicken stew is served, and after that comes the bride's dance. Only those who pay for the honour may dance with the bride and pay they all do! The money thus collected belongs to the bride. At dawn the bride and the bridegroom go back to his house, as the guests have also dispersed. If it is still dark, they go up to the loft, lie down in their clothes and wait for the morning... There is an invisible barrier between them... The bride sleeps sometimes for a whole week in the loft, with the — sisters of her lawful husband...

Now the bride should make friends with her new home and her husband, but that is a very difficult matter. She will not eat before her husband... She is ashamed... After dinner she runs home to her mother, stays with her until the evening and has dinner and supper with her.

In a Matyó house there is a room on the right and another on the left of the porch. In one of these no fire is ever laid, not even in the greatest cold. This is the bedroom of the new woman. At night there is no one in the porch, the old people sleep in the other room and the new husband sleeps in the stables of one of his neigh-

* [See Cat. 116, p 94 -- Analyst]

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585 bours. One must know that the Matyó stable, as they call
[29] it the «sty», is the meeting place and living room of the men. There is even a fireplace in it. It is as it were a club house of primitive people. They collect there to talk, to smoke, to fry bacon. If the new wife is in love with her husband, she soon opens the door to him when he slinks home about midnight... But sometimes he may have to wait for a whole month. And they have to be extremely careful, lest the old people should notice something. This is taken very seriously, and next morning the young couple, and especially the new husband have something to listen
[76] to... To give some sign of love before others is a grave disgrace. Sooner or later however some event will occur, and presumably the old people also know that a baby is not brought by the stork, nor does it grow on a rose-bush, as the ladies-in-waiting of the Whitsun queen say in their songs... But all this is in vain, laws are laws, and the Matyó laws are particularly strict. This strictness is the cause of all those possible «disgraces» which may befall the young couple, during the wedding celebrations, if they do not take utmost care.

Wedding customs

(A little history is mingled with this chapter)

585 The most frequent word used in connection with a
574 Hungarian wedding is the word «lakodalom» meaning banquet, that is feasting, carousing; the marriage is celebrated, the wedding takes place, but the «lakodalom» is eaten and enjoyed! The Hungarian saying: «a 'lakodalom' in the hills and in the valleys» means an entertainment which is gay, well fed and endless. Food, drink,

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585 music, toasts, anecdotes, these are its ingredients. When
574 enough has been eaten, the effects of wine are dissipated in songs and shaken off with dancing. But it is still better if high spirits couple the two. Soon they had a slogan :

Host, have your house swept,
Have that long table carried out
And all the dishes and plates,
For dancing there shall be plenty of space!

535 Space alone is not sufficient for Hungarian dancing, it requires a great many more things. Hungarian wine is also important, and it certainly played an important part in teaching Hungarians to dance. This is what an old poem says :

We have had a good wine harvest,
It will give us full strength
And a great wish for dancing!

But even wine is not sufficient for Hungarian dancing, it takes other things as well. These essentials were enumerated very long ago by a Hungarian nun, who lived before the battle of Mohács (1526). According to her the following are the essentials for dancing : «the space shall be beautiful, wide, light and peaceful ; there shall be an abundance of food and strong liquor, the bodies of the dancers shall be beautiful, light, elegant and strong».

Naturally music is also wanted, and for some old Hungarian dances singing as well. Even in Heaven one cannot imagine — for instance — the «kállai kettős» (a renowned old Hungarian dance) danced otherwise than it is done down here, as without its peculiar music and songs it is no dance at all. «I wonder whether they dance in Heaven» enquires the Hungarian nun in her beautifully

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Photo : A. Wagenhuber

Carriers of wedding presents

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written Hungarian treatise compiled not long after the discovery of America. And «what kind of sound will there be while we dance? Will there be violonists, lute players, drummers, «cimbalom» players? Yes, there will be» — she anwers with conviction, — «songs are also sung while dancing».

The German author of the «Ungarischer oder Dazianischer Simplizissimus» writes about the Hungarians in 1683, in his 19th chapter: «Practically all their dances are ballets; they dance very gracefully and neatly, not like the Germans or the French, who think such a lot about their own steps». The German artist August Ellrich, writes in his book «Die Ungarn wie sie sind» in 1830, that while dancing the Hungarians sway so beautifully, that compared to them the Fandango of the Spaniards, the Saltarella of the Neapolitans, the Mazurka of the Poles, the Waltz of the Germans and the Minuet of the French are merely grotesque convulsions. All these are a long exhibition of clumsiness, there is only one real dance, and that is the Hungarian dance. It is the perfection of grace and charm. The Hungarian dance is a bewitching marvel. «A man» — he writes, — «who has seen a woman in her Hungarian costume dance a Hungarian dance really well, and can still quickly and correctly answer the question «what is twice two?» is a man, whom I, if I were a girl, would scorn as a lover!»

But for this dance it is very necessary that besides Hungarian high spirits and Hungarian wine the «bodies performing shall be beautiful, light, elegant and strong». If a wedding lasted one or two weeks, — which in olden days was no rare event, — it afforded a great many opportunities for dancing. And many were provided already before the wedding; there was a dance for wooing a girl, for courting her, one for getting engaged and exchanging rings,

525 one for the vigil (when they wept over the bride) for the
585 reception of the bride's envoys and her best men; one
for the wedding banquet; one at the girl's home, at the
574 first visit of the girl's parents to their married daughter; one when the young woman is taken to church after her first baby. The young, the old and the guests had their own dances and what is more, the invited and the uninvited guests had separate dances. During the marriage ceremony there was the priest's dance, before that the kitchen dance, the scarf dance and the present dance; the dawn-fire dance or singeing of the bride, and in some parts of the country many other dances as well. But all these varied not so much in choreography, as in mood, because the Hungarian dances offer an almost unlimited opportunity for improvisation, subject to moods and individual fancies. The bride's dance was always slow (an old poem advises the bridegroom also to be restrained in his movements). All the wilder was the dance of the uninvited guests, who had to be satisfied with one or two songs; in these the whole village, any member of it, could take part without being invited; and they did take part indeed, insisting on their right to do so.

535 The singeing of the bride occurs on the second day
585 of the wedding. It is a ceremonious dance; they dance around a fire lit in the courtyard, and the bride even jumps over it, in order to free herself of all evils, as in the fire jump of Midsummernight. At weddings the mice dance, the candle dance and the pillow dance were often performed. These were playful dances, they usually had their own tunes and songs. The pillow dance was performed to this song:

In a lonely mill
There is an oak beam,
A little owl lady
Walked sprucely along it.

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Photo: Hung. Nat. Mus. — K. Viski 000

Fixing up the new wife's bonnet.

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585 The centre of the wedding dances is the bride's dance : as we saw at the Matyó wedding, it must be paid for.

581 Payment for the bride, and a whole lot of other wedding customs, almost all of them in fact, have their explanation in the two ancient forms of acquiring women : kidnapping them and buying them. Tho this day the Hungarian wedding customs preserve many fragments and symbols of these ancient ways. Hunor and Magor, that is Magyar, the founders of the two sister nations, the Huns and the Hungarians, still kidnap their women according to the legend of the golden stag. Our laws of the 11th century vigorously forbid the kidnapping of women, and threaten the kidnappers. Later on, in a certain transition period, the punishment of girl kidnappers was not taken too seriously. The 13th century penal code of the Hungarian town of Selmecbánya prescribes that a kidnapper shall be punished only it the girl feels no affection for him. At the time of the conquest of Hungary — over a thousand years ago — the purchase of women was more customary at least amongst the more distinguished people. The Hungarian language still calls a marriageable girl a «girl for sale» and the literal translation of «vőlegény», the Hungarian for bridegroom, is «buying man». The purchase price of a woman was as much as her were-geld in case she was kidnapped ; the highest price was a hundred bullocks. Amongst the ancient Hindus the were-geld was a hundred cows, amongst the ancient Arabs a hundred camels, amongst the ancient Greeks a hundred oxen : hekatombé. At that time the girl's dowry consisted of valuable furs : it was on account of these that she was sometimes called Neste or Nyusz, the former meaning marten, the latter sable. The two daughters of Leader Gyula, who occupied Transylvania, were called Karoldu and Saroldu, that is black and white weasel. But the Hungarian word «hölgy», which means

1. See cat. 116, p. 110 — Analyst]

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«young lady», in olden days meant also weasel, and the Hungarian word for ermine is «hölgy»-weasel. The people call the weasel «lady weasel» whether it be a «he» or a «she». In consequence of some atavistic survival it is considered a «she» to such an extent, that if a weasel, that is a «lady» weasel gets busy round the hen-coop a little hemp ball is placed in it, so that when «she» comes, she shall see her accustomed feminine implement and spin rather than harm a fellow woman! An even better proof is the fact that a whole series of Hungarian words, all connected with marriage, have become common everyday words on the basis of the word «menyét» i. e. weasel. Such are meny, meaning daughter-in-law; menyekző: marriage; menyasszony: bride; menyecske: young woman. Innumerable symbolic memories of the purchase of women are still alive in Hungarian weddings. They attempt to kidnap, or for fun even actually kidnap, the bride; they besiege her house, all kinds of obstacles are placed before the wedding procession, even shots are fired. The best men have to do all sorts of difficult things and they also have to solve riddles. — On the other hand, several things have to be paid for to this day: entrance into the house where the wedding takes place, for fetching the bride's belongings, for dancing with the bride; moreover women who help in the kitchen have to be paid, and so on.

In certain districts of Hungary the cock plays a great part in a wedding. A cock is led at the head of the wedding procession, or the bridegroom carries one in his hand; or cocks are made of sugar or sweets. — In other parts jugglers enliven the wedding by performing funny tricks invented for the occasion, in a few places we find beautiful pageants.

One of the most important events in a wedding is taking off the wreath, it is the symbolic ceremony through

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The wedding cock Photo : R. Balogh

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585 which the girl becomes a woman. Taking off the wreath is usually the task of the best man. Sometimes the best man sticks the wreath onto his stick, sometimes it is hung onto a pitch fork and sometimes is carried back amidst the wedding party stuck onto a sword. All these are the remnants of extremely ancient customs. In the 17th century, at Transylvanian aristocratic weddings, the wreath was cut off the bride's head as a memento that «she shall thus behave herself in holy wedlock, that if she besoils it, a sword will fall onto her head.» But this Hungarian custom existed already in the 13th century. The son of the Hungarian king Béla IV. in 1264 also cut the wreath off the head of his bride, Kunigund, with a sword, according to the words of a German chronicler — juxta ritum suae gentis — according to the custom of his own nation. One may judge from all this the antiquity and the importance of popular custom from the point of view of cultural history.

The gathering of the grapes

521 This is the last of the great outdoor tasks which have
245 to be done in autumn. In time it is the last, in the way of amusement and gaiety it is the first. No wonder, as it means collecting, sorting and pressing the universal medicine of all Hungarian sadness. It is a lasting joy to the farmer if he presses a great quantity of nectar in his cellar and it is at least one gay day of oblivion for the poor people who, «sic vos non vobis», collect for others and press for others : but on this occasion they can also drink plentifully — themselves. Gathering the grapes without gaiety and

527 wine is like having a wedding without music. According
245 to ancient custom, the gathering of the grapes is not serious work: that is, only half of it is serious, its other half is made up of amusement. It is part of the tradition that the work shall be unpaid — and one does not look a gift horse in the mouth. It is like the help volunteered for picking maize and plucking feathers, or for reaping the harvest or helping to build a house in the Szekler country, where all relations, friends and neighbours co-operate and in exchange for a few turns of work receive a few glasses of wine or turns of dancing. Of course the gipsies cannot be missing from the gathering of the grapes. In ancient times they had pipes, later on gipsy players of stirring, undisciplined Hungarian songs. But why have discipline in enjoyment: why use a breake when the cart is going up hill?

[192] In Hungarian the process of gathering the grapes is expressed by one word: *Szüret*. When a Hungarian has an unexpected joy, when he has hopes of a great success, when a vista of unforeseen possibilities opens up before him, surpassing his most daring expectations, he expresses his joy with the one word: *Szüret!*

245 The Hungarian vineyards afford pleasure and gaiety,
273 they deserve affection and sacrifices. The volcanic soil of
[134] the Hungarian vineyards is unsurpassed in any other part of the world. It yields the golden coloured «aszu» of Tokaj, which according to a Hungarian saying revives even the dead, the red wine of Eger called «bull's blood», the sweet poison of Badacsony or Somlyó which makes the dumb speak and forces even diplomats to tell the truth! Long experience has ripened the Hungarian proverb: truth is found in wine; «in vino veritas» as our Latin speaking forbears used to say. Wine is the national drink of the Hungarians. Thus does a popular song express this truth:

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Let's go away from here,
We may get a hiding!
No, let's not go
Until the violins are playing!
Bring wine for the Hungarians,
Brandy for the Slovaks,
Beer for the Germans!

The grapes ripen in a dry summer and a long, mild autumn: they take a long time to grow and ripen, and in every part of the country they can boast a different fame and quality. There are as many kinds of wine as there are Hungarian dialects: it has as many colours as Hungarian peasant costumes, it has as many tastes, flavours, bouquets as Hungarian songs or Hungarian tunes. Its effect and strength surprise one like the beauty of Hungarian shepherd carvings or embroideries.

Every peasant vineyard, even if only half an acre in [343] size, has its own cellar built into a hill, before which is a porch with a fireplace. People go there very frequently to sit about, roast bacon, drink a few glasses of wine and smoke. In some places whole villages grow up in the [36] vineyards, called hill-villages. Their laws are even more strict than those of the other villages. And strictest of all are the laws observed during the gathering of the grapes. Those who behaved badly at a «szüret» were in ancient times sent back to the bosom of Abraham: that is to say, they were removed from amongst the living. People were not even allowed to swear in the vineyards. In olden times even justice was stayed at the time of the gathering of the grapes. Though it was never admitted, yet in fact even Mohamed's prohibition of strong drink was ignored during the Turkish occupation, those 250 years during which the Turks came in contact with Hungarian wine, — years which had such a disastrous influence on the advance of Hungarian

245 culture. Faithful agas and beys were carried home on
273 stretchers more than once from the table of hospitable Hungarian soldiers and captains; or perhaps not from the table, but from under the table . . .

245 To-day, as well as in olden times, most weddings
527 are celebrated on new bread and new wine, that is after the grapes have been gathered. Gathering the grapes is the gay closing of the yearly farm work, it is the crowning of labour with grapes ! The saying of a Hungarian ballad :

> She who finds a red grape first
> Will celebrate her wedding in autumn !

indicates merely the usual season in which weddings are held. Small wonder that the young people look forward to the gay days of autumn with an even greater longing than the farmer who has run out of wine. The time for gathering the grapes round the Balaton (Badacsony) and in the part of Terézia, Somlyó, Orsolya and Tokaj begins on the day of Simon and Judas, that is generally in the second half of October. But in 1812 it happened that in consequence of the heavy snow the grapes could not be gathered in that year at all, but only at the end of February in the following year. The new wine thus came too late and the weddings were left over until the following spring . . . When the storks came back ! . . .

The vineyards, which are carefully guarded and are deadly quiet in the late autumn, are seething with life at the time of gathering the grapes. The hills seem to move: coloured patches swarm about on them, songs resound, guns go off. The rattles and whips for frightening birds are now used to frighten the female part of the assembly. In these light-hearted days the guard shoots off all his cartridges, he will have — if he'll be able to buy them — some more next year; to-day is the day of gaiety and

unrestrained noise ! The gipsy creeps about the hills, from vineyard to vineyard, as on a namesday or on a great feast, to greet his favourite clients and, especially the owner of the vineyard, who comes to listen to him at the inn when he has run out of his own wine. The door of the cellar is open, the wine from last year and the year before takes effect, provokes laughter and jokes, and brings songs to the lips of those who like it. Not only does it inspire speech and song ; it also adjusts hats to a rakish angle and makes the steps of the guard uncertain as he goes from vineyard to vineyard : and, if it strikes a «long hair», its effect is also sufficient : women understand the jokes much better !

In the open space before the cellar the «paprika» meet boils ; the stuffed cabbage, brought from home, is warmed up, and those whose appetite has been taken away by the grapes can still put it right before dinner with excellent rape and wonderful, fragrant peach brandy. The table is laid on grass which is going grey, around it blossom good appetite, good health, friendship, gaiety and one more thing unavoidable amongst Hungarians : — toasts — and later on discussions about politics. Finally the children have to recite a few poems. Most frequently we hear the appropriate poem of the well known Hungarian poet Lévay, called : «Our *Szüret*» . . . And then they go home early in the falling twilight, as to-morrow there is going to be another day. There is not much work in autumn, and it might give one the chance of a grand answer if someone asked how long the gathering of the grapes lasted . . .

But the «szüret» continues at home and in more than one place it is followed by a hot supper, its end being well after midnight.

Sometimes things do not go as smoothly as all that. If the weather is unkind, spiteful people wish the gatherers of the grapes a «*Large vintage*», or «*Big boots*». This is not

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527 a good wish. It is a veiled reference to the fact that the channels of the heavens increase what has grown by the mercy of God; the vintage will be larger, because water is mixed with it. The big boots are wished as a protection against the terrible mud, which makes not only walking, but even standing a miserably difficult thing on the steep hills, and causes such big «sandals» to stick to the boots every minute that it takes enormous strenght to get rid of them.

The owner of a large vineyard engages workers paid by the day. According to ancient custom they make an enormous «grape» bouquet, such a big one that two people have to carry it on their shoulders on a pole. Soon there is a whole procession. The gipsies go in front playing gay dance tunes, after them come a few players, who do all kinds of comic turns, then the gatherers of the grapes, then a few people who carry flags, finally girls dressed in white surrounding the enormous cluster-like grape bouquet. The girls wear wreaths made of wild flowers on their heads. They pass through the village dancing, singing and shouting, they go to the house of the farmer and, on their way, they drink from their flask to the health of every person they meet. In the farmer's house they hang the big cluster of grapes onto the ceiling, and they are then given a good meal.

In other places the lads go through the village on horseback, in their wake come the girls in carriages and the «szüret» procession is finished at the village inn with a dance. The innkeepers of Budapest also arrange the same kind of thing at the time of the «szüret» with the help of people paid for the job, thus uniting business advertisement with ancient Hungarian customs. A procession of this kind in the Hungarian capital usually ends up in a little inn with a garden in Buda, where everyone can join the dance

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Photo: Hung. Nat. Mus. — S. Ebner

Vintage

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245 527 which follows it. This is an artificial flower bouquet, a pale copy of the old, familiar custom, but it tries with much good will to create at least the illusion of the real thing for the joy of people who live in the great town. On seeing it people from the country-side at least dwell on the memories of their childhood.

The richest, brightest and gayest «szüret» customs prevailed in the districts in which the wine harvest was the best and richest. The first of these is the district of Tokaj and in it the little town of Mád, which is a famous place for grape ceremonies. The entertainments of its gentry are worthy of a novelist's pen. The dances of its coopers and agricultural labourers preserved a whole list 415 789 of ancient Hungarian customs. Speaking of Carnival, let us mention a few.

If wine is the favourite national drink of the Hungarians, it is necessary for it to appear in proper attire. The things with which wine is clothed, are : a stone bottle, a flask or a noggin. The noggin can be a decoration on a table, a nice partner on a journey, a dear lover always kissed with joy ! The person who knocks it out of our hands shall be cursed ! Terrifying, fearful words are usually written on the flask, to cut short all kinds of evil thoughts. For instance :

To the person desiring to steal this flask,
Though that he shall become so grand,
That he shall push wheel-barrows in Buda or Pest,
And become the captain of the beggars !

But if we approach the beloved flask without evil thoughts, it speaks to us as Hungarian men usually address their guests :

This bottle, made of clay, belongs to Simon Kiss,
From this he offers a drink to many of his friends.
Take a nice, long draught from it,
A bad road does not matter to a good horse !

415 789 Sometimes the friendly appeal and the threat of consequences in case of unrightous behaviour follow each other in the lines of a verse:

If you have a drink from it,
May it become you well;
If you steal my flask,
May you break your neck.

Some of the flasks are made in the shape of a cross or prayer book. A squat, earthenware «book» explains its origin in the following line:

This is the daily devotion of Joseph Papdi.

This kind of pagan epigram sounds very much like blasphemy. But if we ask the profane Hungarian carefully whether he is not ashamed of the horrible words with which in his bitterness he curses heaven and earth, he reassures us with absolute conviction:

— «It does not go to the same place as our prayers!»

Superstitions of Saint Lucia's day

796 December the 13th, Saint Lucia's day, is the day popularly dedicated to a whole collection of superstitions. It is 12 days before Christmas, and thus precedes the feast by the same number of days as Christmas in the Gregorian Calendar precedes the Christmas of the ancient calendar. The popular name of this space of time is Saint Lucia's calendar, and the majority of the customs and superstitions of the winter solstice have crowded together on this one day, as the witches do on Sylvester's night on Saint Gregory's hill in Buda...

754 789 Speaking of witches, we should like to add that it is just on this unfortunate 13th, Saint Lucia's day, that we can, if we wish, see witches face to face... If anyone

wants to see them in Hungary, let him follow the local custom... To this end we must carve a small milking stool, just big enough for one person to stand on. The carving must be begun on Saint Lucia's day, and every day we must do a little more. It must be finished on Christmas day. The stool must be made of nine kinds of wood, or better still, of thirteen odd bits of wood... It must have four legs, a top and two wedges to secure each leg, making thirteen pieces in all; the same number as the date of Saint Lucia's day; — the thirteenth day reckoned from the one which dawns after the last day in Saint Lucia's calendar.... — If we are working on it in the evenings, and an unknown voice says: — «You work thus if you want to master it!» — we must not answer but merely go on calmly with our task. It is a long job, but well worth it... Even a Hungarian proverb has it that: «It is made as slowly as Saint Lucia's stool.» When the stool is ready, it is advisable to put on our waistcoat inside out, and make a knot in our tie or scarf. If, having thus put everything in order, we go to the midnight mass at Christmas, draw a circle round ourselves with chalk, and stand on top of the stool at the consecration of the Host... lo! we can see all the witches one by one! They leap around the priest all naked; they curse and spit; some of them have horns, others moustaches, a few wear a milking pail on their heads... They all turn their heads away from the Sacrament with horror... But as soon as we have seen and recognized them, we must run! We must pull the stool to bits, and rush home at full speed! It is wise to throw poppy and caraway seeds behind us for the witches following us to pick up. For these they even give up the chase! Having reached home we had better throw the stool straight into the fire, so that it may burn without leaving a trace!

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754 It is a good thing to know the witches, so that we
789 shall also know which bad soul of the village takes away the milk of the cow and causes other sterility . . . Because, with chickens for instance, there is also much trouble at this time of year: it is already Christmas, and they do not even think of beginning to lay eggs. But there are remedies even for that. It is wise to know them, especially those of Saint Lucia's day. These rules, which count as remedies, are the following: — we must not sew on Saint Lucia's day, — we must not spend money, — in the evening we must frighten the fowls with a piece of wood, — the mistress of the house must drive the hens off their roost in the hen-coop with a broom held in her left hand; we must shake the scovel over the hen-coop; — on this day we must sleep on maize and throw this same maize to the hens; — we must steal a little wheat from the mill for the hens, — we must feed the hens from a sieve. One or two of these precautions must prove effective, especially if, while doing it, we murmur some traditional spell, for instance: — «Our hen shall lay eggs, that of our two neighbours shall only cackle; my hen shall lay and lay, the neighbour's hen shall cackle and cackle; — hens, hens, you shall lay and cackle, lay and cackle; I also shall cackle, you also shall cackle, hens, hens, lay eggs! — When you shall lay eggs, the hens of the others shall only cackle!»

These are the most effective things we can do on Saint Lucia's day, but if for some reason we do not have complete faith in them, then we must welcome the «kotyolók». (cacklers) These are the later descendants of our ancient sorcerers who conjure up fertility.

They bring under their arms straw or a log of wood, put it down onto the doorstep, or more often in the room just behind the door, and then they start their magic cant:

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Photo : Hung. Nat. Mus. — S. Ébner

«Cacklers» of Saint Lucia's day

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Lucia, Lucia, cackle, cackle,
Their hens and their geese shall lay eggs,
Their cows shall give plenty of milk,
Lucia, Lucia, cackle, cackle...

They shall have as many eggs
As there are stars in the sky,
They shall have as many chickens
As there are stones in the gravel,
Lucia, Lucia, cackle, cackle...

They wish for other earthly blessings as well, especially for fertility:

Their axe, their driller shall stand in its helve
Like a young tree, straight and erect,
Lucia, Lucia, cackle, cackle...

While the children, even grown lads, sing with the «kotyolók», the mistress of the house sprinkles their heads with water, dropping it through a sieve, or throws maize on their heads. The «kotyolók» leave the straw or the log behind, but they steal some more in the courtyard for the magic which is to be performed in the neighbourhood. The mistress of the house puts the straw under the hens, and gives them the maize. The kotyolók go about at dawn, because should a woman visitor call before them, their efforts would be vain...

It is unwise to drive away these sorcerers, because they then use their power the other way round. And these spells in the opposite sense are just as forceful as the real one:

Lucia, Lucia, cackle, cackle,
They shall only have one chicken
And even that one shall be blind!

But if they are received in a friendly way, and are even placated with the traditional dry pears, then we may be certain that: — «Our hen shall lay eggs and also cackle, but yours shall only cackle...»

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The feast in celebration of the killing of the pigs

262 [252] Besides bread, the favourite food of poor people in Hungary is bacon. They eat it «white», with salt or pepper, smoked, boiled or roasted. In the arrangements made with servants, in the contracts drawn up with reapers, bacon is always mentioned. When the hero of Hungarian fairy tales starts on his journey, unless he is so poor that he can merely afford flead cakes baked in ashes, his mother puts bread and bacon into his wallet. When the minstrels describe all they see about the farmer's house, their chief admiration goes out to the wonderful pig. They see big, twisted rolls, two tankards of beer, the ears of the oxen filled with cracknels, and all kind of other good things, but their phantasy is most vivid as regards the distribution of sausages and bacon:

> Across his back there are sixty sausages,
> Half of them are for the minstrels;
> Along his back there are hundred pieces of bacons,
> Half of these are for the minstrels...

Even the learned professor, who has reconstructed this song after the ancient text, is bound to smile when he explains that: — «Besides the sixty sausages one hundred pieces of bacon had ample place on the back of the gigantic pig; one lot went across, the other along his back...»

252 264 If Hungarian people make an excursion on one of their leisurely afternoons into their vineyard or to some other pleasant spot, and take their food with them, they may have a hundred different dainty tit-bits in their picnic baskets, (which is not suprising in a country, in which a cookery

book written in 1622 contains 189 recipes for the thirty kinds of fish existing in it) yet the whole entertainment is still called : — bacon roasting. 264 252

A poor man begins with one sucking pig, to end with a pig weighing a ton ; but at a well-to-do house, particularly on the Great Plain, especially if the summer workmen have to be considered besides the people making up the household, six to eight pigs are killed in one winter. Amongst poor people it is the wife's duty to bring up and fatten the pig. She cares for it, even fondles it. She becomes proud of the dear little brute ; she watches it from day to day, — how it grows, improves, puts on weight. From time to time she tries to lift it up by the tail, as long as she can cope with its weight. Gradually the animal gets «ripe», it is already in the middle of November when it refuses to eat anymore. And when Elisabeth shakes her petticoat, — that is if it snows on Elisabeth's day (the 19th of November) they kill it, unless they prefer to wait until Catherine's, Andrew's or Lucia's day, — or even — if there is no hurry — until the middle of the two Christmasses (the period between «great» and «small» Christmas, that is between Christmas and New Year). 262 231 [821]

The killing of the pig is counted as a family feast, the children do not even go to school on that day. They feast, celebrating the event of having killed the pig. But there is a great deal of work before that. Practically every Hungarian farmer is an expert at killing and preparing the pig. If several pigs are killed, the farmer calls in only his good friends and pals, and the feast is really the reward for their help which cannot be paid for with money — and it is not done otherwise. 231 574

Work begins before the light of dawn. The friends and relations come with lamps, on their shoulders they bring pitch forks, a few of them carry knives. First of all they

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must fortify themselves for this cruel work. The stone bottle makes the round, filled with plum or peach brandy.

But one has to be careful with that poisonous drink, as everyone must remain sober. After it they eat a few hot cakes, or boiled sausages if any are left over from last year, then they take a few drops of wine and off they go to work ! By the time it has dawned, the victim has already been brought back from the end of the village, where the actual killing and the singeing of its skin is done with great care and cleanliness. Gaiety and many jokes accompany the work the whole day through. At the end of the village the night wind bites through the air. A few drops of what they have been drinking in the house would be very welcome . . . But the work needs great care, therefore the host brought none of it with him. But one of his pals produces a flat stone bottle from his pocket ; with a serious face he takes a long draught from it and hands it to his neighbour. He also takes a draught, but for nothing in the world would he let out that there is only water in it . . . He too passes it on . . . Only when the bottle has got back to its owner, does someone remark : — «This is good brandy, a thousand pities that it *has not kept its currant*» ; or «*this one has never been on a tree*» ; or «*its strength has somewhat gone . . .*»

Meanwhile everyone works at home ; water is being boiled, the pap thinned, pepper or paprika pounded, knives sharpened, firkins cleaned, fresh dish-clothes prepared . . . Everything is extremely clean, only in the air do many smells and much steam collect ; the house is full of them.

The dissecting and preparing is done with great skill, no trained butcher could do it better: They know every part of the animal, and each part is used for a different purpose ; the name of all these would make up a whole dictionary. They keep on washing their hands, their cleanliness is extraordinary.

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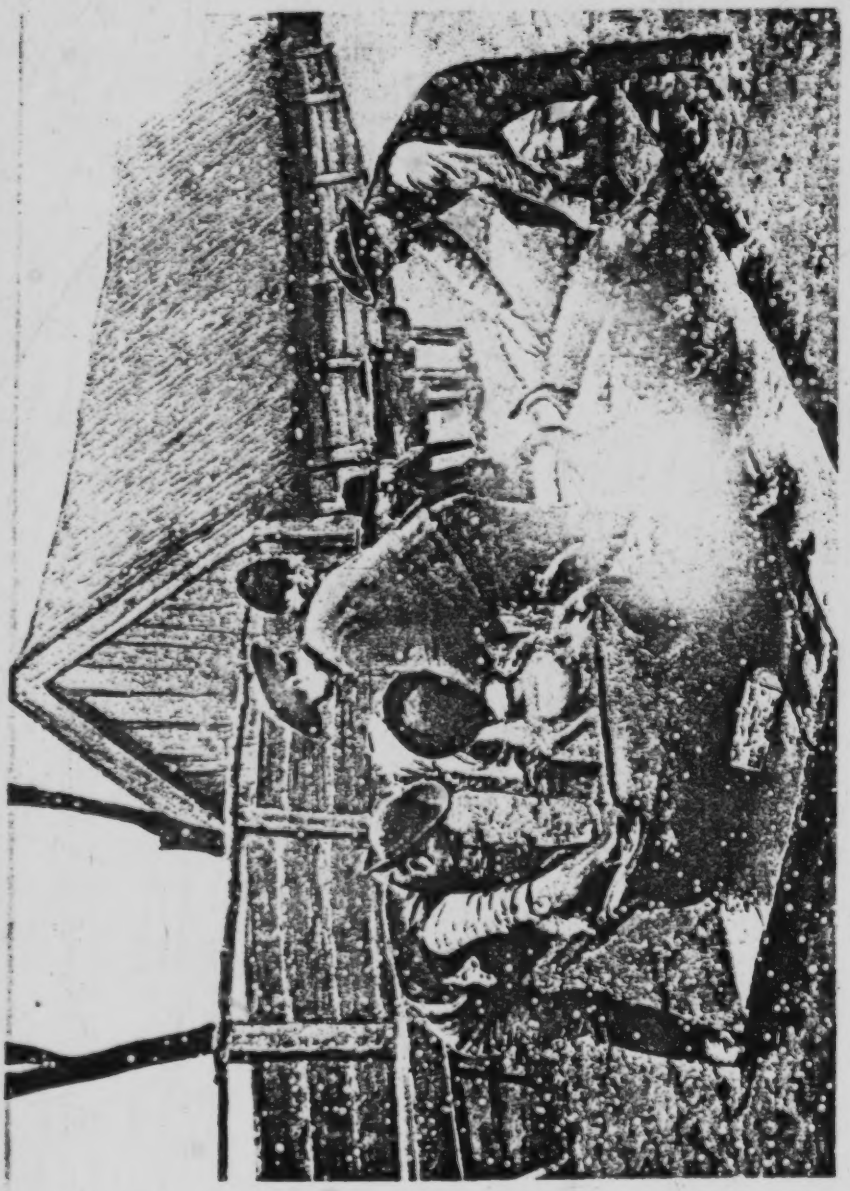

Photo: Hung. Nat. Mus.

Killing of the pigs

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By the evening everything is ready: white and other sausages, black pudding, a pudding made of sow's maw; even lard, all salted, lies in its place. Dinner too is ready: it is the tasty sign of gratitude for the help proffered by friends and relatives, and it is also for the members of the household. The menu is: chicken soup with thin noodles, stuffed cabbage, fresh sow's maw pudding and different kinds of sausages. At wealthy houses this is followed by roast capon; the fried sweet is brought in last: doughnuts, cream cheese pudding, flead cakes or other suchlike things, and of course plenty of wine. Hungarian wine has the habit of remedying the defects of a menu consisting of so many heavy dishes.

Naturally there is no lack of toasts; the feast would not be complete without them. Plenty of songs and jokes follow as well. They praise the pig, the maker of the sausages, the cooking of the hostess and most fervently of all the wine, because it lasts until the early morning hours! In the Paloc country they often sing the old song, praising and characterising their beloved wine:

May God allow
That barrels and cellars
Pints and shops shall all be full!
All shall be as it was long ago!
The Hungarians shall never have
Spots on their pants,
Neither on their boots nor on their trousers.
This wine is a good wine,
It cheers the heart,
Makes the spendthrift,
Drives people crazy....

It is an old saying that Hungarians cheer and cry at the same time. We always had and still have a reason for dropping a bitter tear into every glass of wine we drink at a gay feast... And we shed them...

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574 But never mind that ! Time is getting on, therefore let us drink Saint John's grace, and take our leave with the words of the feasters of the Great Plain :

Dear host, we are already off,
We thank you for your kindness,
And beg to leave you . . .
We have had enough
Our your food and drink,
That is why we sing hallelujah !
May God give you a good night,
You and your household,
And all your guests who are leaving !

The whipping of the Innocents

783 That is what the custom of December the 28th is called, as in most places in Hungary people whip each other on this day, though usually the men or boys whip the women. The whip itself is made of willow-twigs, but sometimes a beribboned birch twig is also used for the purpose ! The victim is supposed to become fresh, healthy and free of carbuncles. According to the ancient rite lazy wives and lazy maids get on that occasion what they would have deserved anyhow. Sometimes they get it as early as dawn, in bed, so that the whipping shall be all the more effective. The whipping lasts as long as the oration which accompanies it. For a wife it is often sufficient to say «be fresh, and next time don't answer back», but a lazy daughter or maid servant gets a much longer peroration : «you shall be fresh, healthy, you shall have no carbuncles ; if you are sent down, you shall go up, if you are sent up, you shall go down, if you are sent for water, bring wine ; if you are sent for wine,

bring water, and get married soon !» It is much more 783
difficult to suffer so many good wishes ... Because the whip is spicy, like mustard ; the Szekler whipping starts with the saying : — «I have brought a little mustard seed, may I sow it ?» — Of course permission is always granted ! In other places they ask : — «How many Innocents are there ?» — And they whip as long as their victim guesses the right answer : — «Hundred-fourty-four-thousand !»

Whipping, like so many other customs, also occurs here and there amongst the many hollidays of the Calendar, and amongst the other customs designed to conjure up health, plenty and fertility. In one Hungarian district the whippers, who are here called «slappers», squat in the middle of the room, strike the earth, and meanwhile wish the host a hundred golden florins, the hostess a bag full of coins, a portion of grease as big as a table, a piece of lard as big as the door, and naturally that the hens shall lay eggs ! — In a few places the «bethlehem» visit is also included into this game, by reciting just a few of its verses.

That the custom is of pagan origin is best proved by the fact, that the Church fathers took the matter up at the Synod of Nantes, and unanimously prohibited the whipping of women as a pagan custom unworthy of Christians ...

It is all the more obvious that it is a pagan custom, as in Ovid we find a description of how married women had themselves beaten on the feast of Faunus Lupercalia for the sake of fertility and purification. This feast — the Lupercalia — was on the 15th of February, at the beginning of spring. In Hungary it also happens occasionally that whipping takes place at Easter with budding twigs, but it has also occurred that birch twigs were made to bud for the whipping of December ... A bud is the symbol of fertility.

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Traditions of the spinnery

883 When people talk about Hungarian customs, the spinnery is usually brought up as one of the most typical. It is supposed to be the loveliest and most romantic flower in our garden of traditions. This fact can only be explained by the frequent reference to the spinnery in our popular songs, which were modelled on our folk songs. Inventing these used to be very fashionable in the second half of the 19th century. The gipsies still play the tune: «Songs are afloat in the spinnery» — and the listeners are moved by the mystery of a popular custom which they obviously do not understand, they are all the more impressed if they can sing the pretty words to the music of the gipsy band. «... little spinnery, little maize plucking room ...» is another of these songs, to which people listen worrying but little about the mysterious meaning which lurks behind the words. After all, it is the «mood» which counts, and according to our poets a mood as well as a kiss is better experienced than explained.

An-tan to-ress
Fuss-fass kom-poress
Ané-tané chokolade
Kikiriki is bad!

Present day children in the native country of John Arany (a famous Hungarian poet of the 19th century) also just sing these words: they have never yet tried to explain them. They are part of their games, as the song: «...oh little spinnery...» is one of their enjoyments...

Whatever may have lead us to mention the spinnery as one of our most typical and still practiced national

customs, it is worth our while to get acquainted with its 883
inner life. This custom, like so many others, is kept alive by the opportunity it provides for youth to meet, for romance and playing with the fire, for the meeting of man and maid. It means play amidst work and work amidst play: its frame is work, its essence, play. This is best proved by the fact that in many parts of the country the spinnery as well as the carnival festivities only last until Shrove Tuesday. It is certain that the finest threads have never been spun in the spinnery. Though frothy linen can not be woven from the yarn twisted in the spinnery, those yarns can be used for something else:

> The maid is learning how to spin,
> That wedded she shall know a thing,
> She has spun some clues, exactly nine;
> She has thrown her distaff o'er her head,
> Her thread is not the best of threads:
> It will be woven into a clothes-line.

And when there is a chance of dancing in the spinnery, the youths take the words from the girls mouths when they shout:

> . . . spindle, distaff, reel,
> I wish you all to hell!

It was this side of the spinnery's double nature which 178
for centuries incited the authorities to fight against it. 883
But the spinnery, like all ancient customs, has defended itself valiantly against all attacks, and its total destruction has not been achieved to this very day. It has only disappeared without leaving a trace in the districts where factory industries have successfully extirpated the whole art of spinning and weaving. An example of a large area in which the spinneries have completely disappeared is the Great Hungarian Plain, where the material advancement of the people soonest enabled them to buy linen and cloth for money and throw away their traditional tools.

883 the people soonest enabled them to buy linen and cloth for money and throw away their traditional tools.

The spinnery provides an opportunity for winter meetings. The Szeklers have called it after the tools used in it «spinning room», and after the singing going on in it «chorus». According to a general custom its premises are usually rented, and often there are several spinneries in one village. These places are small, not taking more than a group of eight to ten girls at a time. These groups are also called classes, like forms at school. The priest, or teacher, or landlord often runs spinneries with the object of helping needy farmers with their proceeds; but from the point of view of ancient custom these do not deserve special attention, as they are not suitable for the free development of moods, games and customs. The participants are reserved. It is like a wedding without music... The work is not real and the fun is half hearted... To use an expression coined on the Great Plain: it is too small for a bed and too big for a cradle! The spinnery is always an evening affair, although in some places the girls go to each other for practice also in the day-time, but that again is not the real thing, as the young men are missing, having other things to do. From the point of view of ancient custom the women's spinnery is not important either. There, too, work is taken much too seriously!

883 524 Spinning is a very monotonous, uninteresting task. It is a common occurence to see an old woman dropping her spindle and falling asleep. If the same thing happens to a girl it is a serious disgrace. Therefore, even if they are alone in the spinnery, they joke and sing so that their work shall go better. When the lads begin to drop in, they are even more awake. Spirits rise high, jokes come faster, and the spindle wants more attention. The girl who drops hers, must pay a ransom for its return. Ransoms vary as

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A lad carving a distaff Photo : A. Wagenhuber

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883 in round games. The most frequent ransom is a kiss;
524 but it depends on the lad whether he gets as much as one coin from this inexhaustible purse.

They can pick up my spindle,
But I shant take it, I say,
Not this year and not the next,
Not for a kiss and not for pay.

When the young people have run out of tunes, they then turn to riddles; these puzzles often concern the tools used for spinning, weaving or hemp work.

The birch tree darted
The oak tree started
A thousand birds flew up,
One's wings got torn,
And then all the thousand stopped!

What is it? It is a thread breaking on the spinning wheel.

When their supply of riddles is also running low, they turn to games. To inaugurate a new girl is a game in itself. Those who have just reached the age enabling them to spin are called the *New Girls*. The others look for a little hole in the earth floor and pour water into it. This is supposed to be the «well». They seat the new girl by its side on the floor, to guard the well and prevent anyone drawing water from it. They even give her a whip to drive away all those who want to use the well. The bigger girls stand around her and try to draw the water, which the new girl guards. Meanwhile the girls standing behind attract her attention. As she turns round, those standing in front of the «well» pull her across the puddle! The girls only play this joke when there are no lads about.

The «gedo» is another of the girls' games. One of them makes a hump on her back with a bread basket, sticks on a beard and moustache of oakum, dons a coat and a hat,

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883 524 — in one word dresses up as a man. Then she walks around the girls, asking each in turn:

«Has old Gedo been here?» — The answer is: «Yes, he has been here.»

«What did he want?»

«He wanted girls.»

«Did you give him girls?»

«Yes, we gave him girls and we will give you girls too, if you can plaster a stove (or plant cabbage, or make sheaves, etc.).» — She must now mimic the task mentioned. If she does it well, the girl who set the task has to take her place, if she is bad at it, she gets another task. This is a very primitive pantomime, the lads will be better at their games!

While the girls are still alone, they also like fortune telling and love charms. These are games, yet the girls believe in them a little. One of them is called «cucorka». The «cucorka» is a little hemp ball, which should rise in the air if set on fire. And if it does not fly up it means something bad: her lover is not true to her, or there will be no wedding... Sometimes the girls clap their hands so that the «cucorka» shall fly higher and they egg it on with the song:

Cu-cu-cu-cu-corka,
The magpie sent you word,
She wants a longer tail...

Another game is to make a triangle from oakum and lay it on the table. One of its corners represents a girl, the two others her two young men. The oakum is set on fire in the girls corner and the lad, whose corner the fire first reaches, loves the girl best. Of course the men have their own games and jokes, and keep inventing new ones for the girls and for their own amusement. The men approach the spinnery singing and the girls work better and harder as this song becomes audible from the street:

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Good girl do spin,
But think also of something else,
There is a lad outdoor in the cold,
Let the poor thing in!

Of course they let him in... Obviously he is welcome, when he has been so eagerly expected! With the lads present, spirits soar, the company is more cheerful, the songs louder, the jokes livelier... The work however, does not follow the same crescendo tendency!

The men have many more jokes up their sleeves and they are inexhaustible in improvising. It would take a whole book to describe all their games! But let us not omit one of their delightful, singing, mimic plays! — It is nothing but a primitive ballet, still alive, charming herald of the ancient trinity of poetry, music and motion... In Szekler spinneries, where lovely frail girls form the public, it is still performed to this very day. This ancient ballet lives not only in the pine forests of the Hargitta mountain (Transylvania), but also in Transdanubia, in the Bakony hills. Usually two men sing it, the one asking, the other answering. Occasionally it is also sung in a choir; its name is «sowing song».

I'd like to know how the Hungarians,
I'd like to know how the Hungarians
Sow their oats!

Showing it:

That's how the Hungarians sow
That's how the Hungarians sow
Their oats very slowly!

I'd like to know how the Hungarians
I'd like to know how the Hungarians
Reap their oats, reap their oats!

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Showing it:

That's how the Hungarians reap
That's how the Hungarians reap
Their oats very slowly!

Thus the song goes on, with little variation in the words, but with the mimicry altering from verse to verse: they ask and show how the Hungarians sow, reap, carry in, thrash and sell their oats. We are already inclined to think that the money is safe in the drawer and the remnants of the oats in the granary or mealark. But no! A play without a point is like an i without a dot. That is why there comes a sudden turn:

I'd like to know how the wife
I'd like to know how the wife
Steals the oats, steals the oats!

And then finally:

I'd like to know how the wife
I'd like to know how the wife
Drinks its price, drinks its price!

This is also told to the future wives, lest they should imagine that a man sees nothing and knows nothing and is good for nothing except for what the «Selling Song» thinks him fit: «.... a watch-dog, a fire-poker...»

Time however is getting on and all good things end... But not in a hurly-burly way. Things in the spinnery have to be finished neatly, «the full stop must be inserted», as a house has to be roofed to be complete! The finish — in those parts where the custom is still maintained — is the selling of the girls. Two older lads produce a twisted kerchief, and drive a girl to each lad... The kerchief is needed for those girls who «do not want to go...» And as it is unseemly to want to go, the two men throw the kerchief behind the girl's back and thus «help» her to go!

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Photo: A. Wagenhuber 000

The spinnery

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883 524 Which means that they simply thrust her into a youth's lap! All this is accompanied by a song. If they feel like it, the song is long, otherwise it is merely a short selling song.

Double carnations have grown outside my garden,
I want you and only you, my Master Martin!

And at the final syllable the girl is already in the man's lap... There are longer selling songs too, and the interesting part is that in these the geese are mentioned in the same sense as in those parts of Midsummernight's song in which the couples are charmed together.

I drove away my goose into the middle of Saint George,
I sent my husband after it, to drive my goose home.
The goose shall come home, and my husband shall get lost,
But no! he shan't get lost, he is a nice, pipe smoking fellow!
He would be good here at home as a watch-dog,
As a watch-dog, as a fire poker,
My geese, my geese, there are twelve of you,
All the twelve of you are dead white,
Two of them are brown, the third is their mother,
What shall be the name of the fourth?
If it can't be Martin, I shan't have a lover,
But if it is Martin, I shall have a lover!

This can only mean that the pagan remnants of Midsummernight's mating feast have taken refuge in the closed territory of nocturnal spinneries, and here continue their life, which has been whittled away for centuries by secular and church prohibitions. In the first half of the 17th century a protestant preacher noted that *the boys played ball with the girls* in the spinneries. How could they have played ball in a small house, crowded with people? We do not know, but according to the preacher the spinnery is an occasio mali: a suitable place for wickedness, an abode of depravity... There is some truth in this. The girl having been driven to a man, comes the last verse of the song:

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For thee, to thy bed,
She shall lay on thy bed,
Thank thou for it!

Or: For him, to his lodging,
Let's cook for his wedding,
Thank thou for it!

And the girl has to thank for it, if only with a shy, low «thank you!» If she does not do this, perhaps disliking her «share», the choir damns her with ugly words:

Out in the graveyard
Nine dogs lie dead,
Spoons and forks are near them,
Eat them Mary, go ahead!

This happens especially in cases where the choir (the village really) has already given its blessing to a wellknown love affair. As soon as every lad has got his girl, as though they were following the lines of Midsummernight's song,

Your night
Flowery Saint John
Is so very light
— — — —
It was light so far
Now let it be dark.

they turn down the lamp and for a certain time, — for a few minutes, — darkness and complete stilness reign in the spinnery. One or two older men, left without partners, occasionally strike a match, not for the sake of looking at the roof, but to see what the partners are doing! Soon however the match is knocked out of their hands. After having lit the lamp again, the young people disperse and go home.

Two more proofs showing the close relationship between this ancient spinnery custom and the pagan Midsummernight feast are furnished by a Transylvanian «sell-

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ing song», which is sung to this day, and by the notes of the above mentioned preacher. This is what the song says about love and the sun:

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When I think of you
My beautiful one,
Then love *flames*
Up in me.
Fire *flashes, the sun shines;*
Before his dazzled eyes
Roses blossom
And lilies bloom.

And finally this is what the above quoted protestant preacher wrote in 1629: «They used to lay a Saint John's fire in the middle of the village. Then they sat around it and spun. But we made them give up this custum.»

Thus the winter spinnery harbours amongst other things the tradition of a pagan Midsummernight feast, which fled into its precincts for protection against the Christian concept of life . . .

Plays of Bethlehem
Hungarian marionettes

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The Bethlehem players appear at the same time as the minstrels, in most places at Christmas, on the 25th of December, when the sun has its resurrection and gets stronger, and when the days begin to lengthen. Ever since ancient times this has been a great feast: the joyous, loud pagan feast of the Sun, that is the Sun-god. It is the beginning of a new year, of new hope, the recurring expectation of new light, new warmth, new life . . . Paganism awaits the new Sun, Christianity the birth of Christ . . . Is it an acci-

796 dent that these two feasts happen to co-incide? Not at all. The ancient Sun feast, the day of the winter solstice was declared to be the feast of the birth of Jesus only in the 4th century, as there is absolutely no indication in the New Testament of its actual date. The synods and the church fathers of the Middle Ages were busily occupied with the pagan customs of that day, and suddenly they issued the following order : «No one shall dare to represent a calf or a stag at New Year» — we may add that our minstrels are doing it to this day ; — or they went into explanations : — «Good Christians do not worship the sun, either on the 25th of December or at New Year, but the One Who brought the sun with Him.» We also get an answer to the question why these two feasts had to co-incide : — «Christ had to be born on a pagan feast, so that those who indulge in pagan superstitions shall blush.»

Just as the Church fixed the birth of Jesus on the birthday of the Sun-god, so it also endeavoured to replace the pagan customs connected with that date by new, ennobled festival games . . . The substitution was successful. In a thousand years the meaning of the ancient pagan game became obliterated and, in the words of the Bible, those who still practice it literally «do not know what they do». But as though the «ancient festal joy of the pagans» were still alive in the present games of Bethlehem, they sing :

Oh life ! Oh sunshine !

But the song does not continue to praise the Sun, as was once the case ; this is its present gentle form :

Oh dear Jesus !

Though Jesus Himself is the new sun,

«. . . which Balaam saw once upon a time,
Shining like a lovely sun on the sky.»

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Pilgrims returning from the East were the first to 796
speak of the ancient «Bethlehem». They said that in Bethlehem the remnants of the manger in the famous rock cave, could still be seen. In the 7th century Pope Theodosius had all these relics brought to Rome, and it is since then that the custom developed of building little «Bethlehems», that is rocky caves, in the churches, in which carved wooden kings, shepherds and animals pay homage to the Child. Later on real people began to replace the dolls, and gradually festival plays developed around it. When these plays began to become profane, Pope Innocent III. banished them from the churches in the 13th century, — that is to say not the «Bethlehems», but the dramatic performances which had been acted around them, — and prohibited the priest from taking part in the acting of such festival plays. But his contemporary, Saint Francis of Assisi, who loved nature and tamed animals, raised the «Bethlehem» from its discredited position. He took it out into the forest near Greccio, where in the naturalistic scenes of the touching picture of Bethlehem, around a real manger, scented hay and rustling straw, tame live animals were his caste, though they could not always be relied upon to take their «cue» at the right moment. The two orders founded by his followers, the Franciscans and the Clarissas, built a real stall and around it constructed a beautiful rocky landscape.

These two famous orders made this «mistery» popular whereever they established themselves with their convents. In the 14th and 15th centuries this charming play is already acted in the vernacular of the people, not in church, but in the streets, townhalls and under the arcades of the market. In many places the towns arranged these representations at their own expense, like the Easter Passion plays. Amongst the Hungarian towns, in the accounts of Pozsony these expenses already figure in 1440 and in those of Bártfa in

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796 1497. In the Saint James church of Lőcse the beautiful wooden figures, carved for the «Bethlehem» by Master Paul of Lőcse, the famous sculptor, can still be seen. In the churches the «Bethlehem», stripped of acting, still lives, even the marionettes of Bethlehem occur, also remnants of medieval church customs.

This is the past of the Bethlehem games, which at present are played by the people, mostly only by the children; it shows the interesting development of that opponent of the winter solstice games, which had been called into life to destroy them.

796 The dramatic plays, like the marionettes of Bethlehem, also live to this day in certain villages amongst the people, 883 that is really amongst the children. Even a mild church play still exists according to which, on Christmas night the children take a beautifully decorated little Bethlehem into the church, place it on the altar and, there before it, they act the present day form of the games of Bethlehem, with all the verses and songs which go with it. Such is the custom in Transylvania, in certain villages around the river Nyárád.

The plays of Bethlehem are performed in practically every part of the country, with their text more or less rounded off; even in Budapest tiny bands go from house to house with modest «Bethlehems» and modest songs!

The songs and plays have many variations; the tunes are mostly alike, while the texts, the plays and the costumes are very varied. In the West the songs and the acting are short, towards the east these get longer, while the fullest words and tunes are found in the Catholic Szekler districts of the county of Csik, which used to be Hungary's most eastern county. There the acting is also most serious and they adhere very conscientiously to the ancient church and school text. Especially in the Protestant districts of the Great Hungarian Plain the sepherd scenes have grown out

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Photo : R. Balogh

A «Bethlehem play

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of proportion, and in some places there are even comic shepherd plays, in which merely a slight memory of the ancient mysteries still glitters. It is interesting that in some places not boys, but girls, led by an older woman, go round with the «Bethlehem». In the picture we see such a group. Keeping to the most typical amongst the many variations, we will give a short description neither of a Szekler, nor of a Catholic play of Bethlehem, but of one practiced in a Calvinist village.

Seven boys, aged 14 to 16, make up the caste: the King, that is Herod; Joseph; the runner (that is the envoy); two angels, two shepherds. The terrible king is dressed up as a Hungarian hussar: he wears red trousers, a blue dolman, a fur cape thrown over his shoulders, a hussar shako adorns his head, a curved sword hangs by his side, boots with big spurs cover his feet... The two shepherds wear fur coats touching the ground, the fur turned outside; they hold big sticks in their hands, and have sheepskin caps on their heads. The others are usually dressed in white, their mothers having given them the white skirt and the blouse, and they wear both on top of their ordinary clothes. A bright coloured ribbon is tied around their waist and a fine, high paper cap, decorated with bright coloured paper chains, covers their heads; Joseph has a broad, wooden sword, like that of a headsman; the runner has a big stick, which is covered with bright coloured paper, besides this, tiny bells are fastened to the top of it. The Bethlehem is a light, wooden, church-like structure, decorated with brightly coloured paper and long paper chains; it is done as well as the children can possibly do it. A candle burns in it; it lights up the floor of the Bethlehem, which represents a green sward, the holy pictures on its walls, the carved wooden animals around the stall and the Child in the manger. The two angels carry the «Bethlehem».

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796 883 The runner goes ahead and in beautiful rhymes asks permission for his party to enter the house ! If they are welcome, they go in (only Joseph stays out) and the Bethlehem is put down on two chairs. The two shepherds lie down in front of the Bethlehem and sleep ... The others begin to sing :

An angel from Heaven
Has come down to you
Shepherds, shepherds !
Hurry at once
Towards Bethlehem
And you shall see, you shall see
The Son of God
Who was born to-day
In a stable, in a stable ...

At the end of the song, Joseph speaks from outside and, as a tired traveller, asks to be let in. King Herod gives orders to the runner to see «who dares to knock at my door with such courage in his heart». Joseph, still from outside, says what he is doing :

At the order of King Herod
From Nazareth I came for the census,
So long as I don't get a lodging,
I shall not go away.

With the help of the runner, negociations start between the king and Joseph. The cruel king gradually softens and lets in Joseph. Joseph then tells the great news, that «in the manger of an ox a child has been born» who is the Saviour Jesus ... The listeners are amazed, especially at the fact that the Saviour has been born in a manger ... Therefore they ask Joseph, of course in the form of a beautiful song :

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But Joseph what did you think,
When you chose a stable,
Could you find no other resting place
In this town?
Did you prefer the company of cattle,
And the manger for the Chud?

Then, waking up the shepherds, the whole troupe sings together :

Let's go, let's go, let's rejoice,
Let us try to please our Lord Jesus,
Let's respect Him as our Lord,
Let's respect Him as our new Lord !

The shepherds kneel down, they offer the Child a cheese and a lamb, and mingle a few shepherd's jokes with their respectful words . . . Then they all get up and sing together, announcing the birth of Jesus in a stable, in a manger amidst cattle, where «the mouths of calves are his warming stove . . .» After that the king blesses the house in which they were welcomed, not omitting to wish the girl «a priest who'll have to perform the marriage ceremony over her . . .» Then comes one more beautiful song :

A beautiful rose has budded
The whole world expected it for so long :
In Bethlehem a green twig sprouted :
It is a king ; His Majesty was brought from Heaven,
It is a king ; His Majesty was brought from Heaven !
When the Virgin wants to lull
Her babe to sleep,
Her son crying in the manger,
This is what she sings for him :
Oh life, oh sunshine,
Oh dear Jesus,
Oh life, oh sunshine,
Oh dear Jesus !

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883 At the end of this long song, — having collected a few, modest presents — they say good night and press the door handle . . . The runner sprints ahead, to find a new house where they will be let in. The bells on his stick form a rythmical accompaniment to his steps . . . With it he beats the time of the songs too . . . As we hear the gradually vanishing sound of his bells, his gesticulations and his ancient noisy instrument, they remind us of the noise made by the minstrels and, even beyond that, of the ringing, droning, equipment of the Shamans . . . The shepherds' coats, their fur turned outside, remind one of the mimes representing animals . . .

Into what a beautifully gentle form the winter solstice games were transformed from their ancient paganism . . . What a beautiful song they sing on the day of the solstice : «Oh life ! Oh sunshine ! Oh dear Jesus !»

But the performers of the Hungarian Bethlehems also preserve the memory of the Bethlehem marionettes which were shown in medieval churches. They act the scenes of Bethlehem livening and spicing them to the great joy of the youthful public !, In some places these marionettes are made to dance in the Bethlehem, in front of the manger, as though to entertain the Child Jesus. For this purpose a special Bethlehem is needed, in which the figures can be moved from below. In other places the marionettes move just outside the Bethlehem. In one place the marionettes are : the devil, the chimneysweep, two shepherds, one performer called «Lackó», a Hungarian peasant, an actress called Jutka Marinka and the bell ringer, in other places : two shepherds, Death, Herod, the bell ringer; Joseph, and the devil. Sometimes we find a few other figures as well, but they are not very different. Now let us see something of this charming game: in one village in the upper Tisza valley, the marionettes of the shepherds' dance each time the Bethlehem performers

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Photo : Hung. Nat. Mus. — S. Ébner

A «Bethlehem» girl

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sing . . . When the five shepherds lie down, the marionettes do the same thing. When the chorus urges the shepherds to start for Bethlehem because the Saviour of the world has been born, «You'll find in the manger — covered with chaff — a tiny Child — O halleluja !» — the marionette of Herod appears and says : — «I am Herod, the King of the Jews, I know no Lord over me, I am not even frightened of Death». The doll of Death appears : «Come, come Herod, are you sure you are not frightened — even of Death?» Herod (the marionette) backs in terror . . . Death snarls ar him : «Don't edge away ! It is no good, you are already mine ! Bang Herod!» And the marionette of Death knocks off Herod's head. Now the devil appears, he beats and spits at the doll's head of the cruel king, then he throws Herod out of Bethlehem and he himself also retires. When the older shepherd says good bye in the name of the Bethlehem performers, and also asks for some tiny present, the marionette, representing Joseph, the bell ringer, also appears, and he also has a request : «Give a few pennies to Joseph the bell ringer for candles !» It is not in vain that he wears a big wallet at his side . . .

Candles are needed in the Bethlehem, so that their light may vibrate and flicker in the snow covered nights of quiet Hungarian villages. This is the point at which the once enchanting mysteries have arrived from the resplendant altars, the grand halls and proud vaults of colossal domes . . . They returned to the place from which they once started : to the tiny villages of poor peasants, shepherds and farmers, to the badly lit abodes of humble folk like these.

Well then good farmer,
Now that you start us on our way,
God's blessings shall
Fall onto your house,
God's blessings shall
Fall onto your house !

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The end of life

761 We are all in God's hands: our time will be up one day, our candle burnt out, our star have vanished from the sky, just as it is set out in the Book of Fate... When the Great Reaper comes, the soul flies away, and the body starts on its last journey.

«There is no medecine against death,
Neither in the Pharmacy, nor else where...»

is one of the ways in which popular songs attempt to 763 console the mourners. When the hour of death has struck, man is drawn to the earth, he longs for it as though contact with it would deliver him from every evil, relieve him from his suffering, ease his last breath... The sick person is taken off the bed, and laid on the floor on a mat covered with a sheet. There he wrestles with death, [825] until his soul is liberated, and leaves his body. An owl, herald of death, hoots on the chimney: this bird of mourning is supposed to fly away following the dead person's soul, and it comes back with any new-born's soul. Its hoots are a ghostly presage, almost a signpost of the departing soul. People who hear it shudder, yet it is forbidden to cry in the presence of a dieing person, as tears might keep him back, making his departure more difficult; he might not be able to die because his soul would find it too hard to part with life.

741 It is not wise to play with death: the child must not 734 lie on his tummy, the owl must be driven away from the chimney; in our dream we must not have our teeth pulled out, nor must we sing funeral hymns without good reason, nor seat thirteen people at one table...

The last hour having struck, the window is opened before the departing soul as before a captive bird, because its way must not be barred. Otherwise it might not find peace and might return to disturb the living . . . 763 775

The dead person's bed is made up for the last time at home. He is then clothed in his death clothes which for a lifetime have been kept for him with the utmost care. Brides keep their wedding dresses, so that fifty or sixty years later they may be their death wear. In some parts the women begin to embroider their death sheet at the age of fourty, as they want to enter a better world wrapped in their own handiwork. Girls are laid on their death beds in white dresses with a bride's wreath on their heads: their bridegroom is waiting for them in another world . . . And a lad, who dies in his prime, is supposed to be the bridegroom of Heaven . . . The coffin, that eternal bed, was not always black. Only the old people's coffins used to be painted black, those of the young were pale or dark blue, green or white . . . 764

People used to be supplied with several things for this great journey. The old Hungarians were buried with their horses, bows, quivers, later on the head at least of their favourite horse was put by their side. With a woman were buried her sickle and her combs; with a child his toys, and if he died without being baptized, they put his little shirt and his swaddle by his side; sometimes needles and thread were also added.

Occasionally the dead person's favourite possessions were also put into the coffin as provision for his journey; they were meant to cheer and quieten him. In some instances even that which he last desired: food, a bottle of wine and a pipe are also put by his side. Godly people take with them their bible, their psalm book and their rosary twisted round their fingers. In some Hungarian villages

764 the dieing man lies in the courtyard, and his favourite horse is led up to him to bid him a sad fare well . . . In other parts the dead man's most precious animals, his horses and his oxen, accompany him on his last journey . . .

[774] While the dead person is in the house, it is neither swept, nor is a fire laid, for fear that his soul might return. The mirror is covered, because a thousand evils might follow from the dead mans reflection in it . . .

Old men carve in advance their coffin, the gravestone or cross for themselves and also for their wives. Their neighbours dig their eternal resting place for them. In some parts the dead farmer's best friends carve his cross from the finest tree of his yard, decorating it with all kinds of ornaments and inscriptions in verse.

When the sad news has spread round, people come in streams to see the dead man; they praise his fine character, his kind heart, or at least the courage with which he endured his suffering. A black flag flies on the front of the house, or the coffin-lid hangs on its wall facing the street; in the evening candles burn in its window as a sign of death being present. Pain and consternation keep a vigil while darkness covers the abode of mourning. Relations, neighbours and friends also come to take a share in the vigil; pain gets less acute, the mood lighter and as night gets darker, every now and then even a joke is cracked. At midnight everything is silenced and the night, like a black cloth, enwraps the mournful house.

Next morning the wailing for the dead starts all over again. The ancient melody, its rhythm and words regulated merely by dutiful manners and the fluctuations of suffering, resounds without rhyme or cadence: «What were you to me, what were you for me . . . you were my everything, my providence, by beloved dear husband . . . Off you went, leaving me here, alone . . . Who is going to

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Photo : E. Kankovszky

An old woman in white mourning, by her side a hand embroidered death-cloth

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764 earn the daily bread for your poor orphans, who is going to provide them with their clothes... Who is going to console your desperate widow... Who is going to say to me in the morning: woman, do you hear the swineherd sounding his horn? The pigs are already at the gate, drive out the sow! Alas, alas, my poor dear husband, if only I could hear your severe words just once more, just once more...»

The dead person must be properly mourned. A person who has no mourners, is an orphan indeed:

The dead man has been laid in the courtyard,
But there is no one to mourn over him;
Now it is evident who is a real orphan,
It is the one over whose coffin no one sheds tears.

767 If some people cannot mourn properly themselves, they hire professional mourners to wail for them. At least that was the custom in the very near past. The female mourners have a very rich collection of songs, as they had to fulfill their vocation as daily paid workers. Their melodies are not improvised, they are usually taken over from popularized church hymns. The following verse is from the song of a professional mourner of the Great Plain:

My eyes shall cry
My tears shall fall.
Wash my tear-stained face!
This dead man
Needs no heavenly due,
My sad tears shall
Gleam like pearls all over him...

The mourning women have special laments for mothers, wives, children, relations. This is what they sing for a wife:

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The bird has flown away,
The cage is empty,
Her dear mate cooes in vain
Cooes in vain.
She won't return
Because the dark grave
Has already embraced her.

This is for a child:

The news has already started
To spread all over the town,
People are collecting
Dear child, to visit you with a frown.
Death, death, death,
Why were you so cruel,
Weren't you sorry to pluck
Such a lovely flower?
No, you were not sorry,
You made it wither
As you tore it from
His loving parents' arms.

764 "And then dawns the last day . . . Two poles are used or the hearse is pulled out and the dead is carried to find eternal rest in his everlasting abode: his coffin . . . Great care is taken to avoid all occurrences which might disturb the soul of the dead, or prompt it to return. The procession starts out, their songs resound, the good neighbours walk in a row with hoes in their hands, as they have to shuffle the earth on the everlasting abode . . . Not so long ago the men were buried in many places with beflagged pikes, and these were placed in the ornamental pike holders on the grave. The old men were given black pikes, the young men white ones . . . The German poet Count Alexander of Württemberg (1801—1844) refers in two of his poems to the beflagged pike grave yards which he saw in the outskirts of Keszthely. The sight « reminds me of the masts of a dead fleet, it attracts every tired soul let down

your anchor here and rest». (Der Friedhof. Sämtl. Gedichte von Alex. Graf von Württemberg. Leipzig. Reclam-Ausgabe.) To this day grave decorations of this kind can be found in great numbers in the Calvinist cemetaries of the Great Plain and Transylvania, they are most beautiful samples of the Hungarian art of wood carving. While the pike holder is being set up, or even previously, and while the earth drops into the grave, the favourite songs of the deceased are played, even gay tunes, lively csárdás songs . . . 764

When they come back from the graveyard, the funeral feast begins. At first all the poor who have assembled for the occasion are given food. During the funeral feast there is even more gaiety than at the vigil, and in some parts it gradually changes into a joyous feast, as though the funeral had been exchanged for a wedding . . . Because of this strange kind of last wedding feast in many parts even the very old women are buried in their wedding dress, and old men in the clothes which they were given by their fiancées many years previously. This last wedding is especially the due share of an unmarried lad or girl. They are the bridegrooms or brides of Heaven . . . so they have a right to a wedding celebration. At this kind of wedding feast people dance, sing and enjoy themselves as though it were the real wedding of the person in question. 765

In olden days this custom of feasting the wedding of a dead youth or girl was habitual amongst the rich as well as amongst the poor. Coloman Mikes, nobleman of Transylvania (he died in 1686) also feasted the wedding of his only daughter who had died unmarried in the prime of her life. At the funeral feast he declared that if his daughter had not died, they certainly would have celebrated her wedding. As he had married his daughter to Our Saviour Christ, Mikes expected: «All who love me to be gay at my house to-day!» And gay they were,

765 music and dance filled the house and the feasting guests enjoyed themselves until the early morning hours with the father of the deceased bride of Heaven.

According to one evidence in the 17th century there still existed a special dance of the dead, or «death dance», in which the deceased was also represented.

At a funeral feast the popularized church song «The Wedding of Kanaan» was usually sung; this is one of its many verses:

Let us pray to God that we shall rejoice
When we'll announce our wedding,
Without good wine, and without pipes
It is as senseless as a dance without hops.

In olden times the «marriage dance» of the death wedding was performed by the grave, but later on, in consequence of Church prohibitions, only just inside the graveyard gate, and at last only outside it. The farewell song of a dead girl details fully the analogy between an earthly and a heavenly wedding. The following lines illustrate this best:

My priest is my father
And my good minister.
The choirmaster who sings
Is my best man and my witness.
My bridesmaids are
The spades and hoes here used.
Such is my wedding!

In some parts they beg leave to give the deceased girl away, using the same words as for a live bride.

765 822 To-day the colour of mourning is usually black, but there are districts where it is still white, purple, blue or some other colour. The ghost rising from its grave also appears in a white garment in the world of the living. The bearers of a dead girl in many parts dress in white; in a

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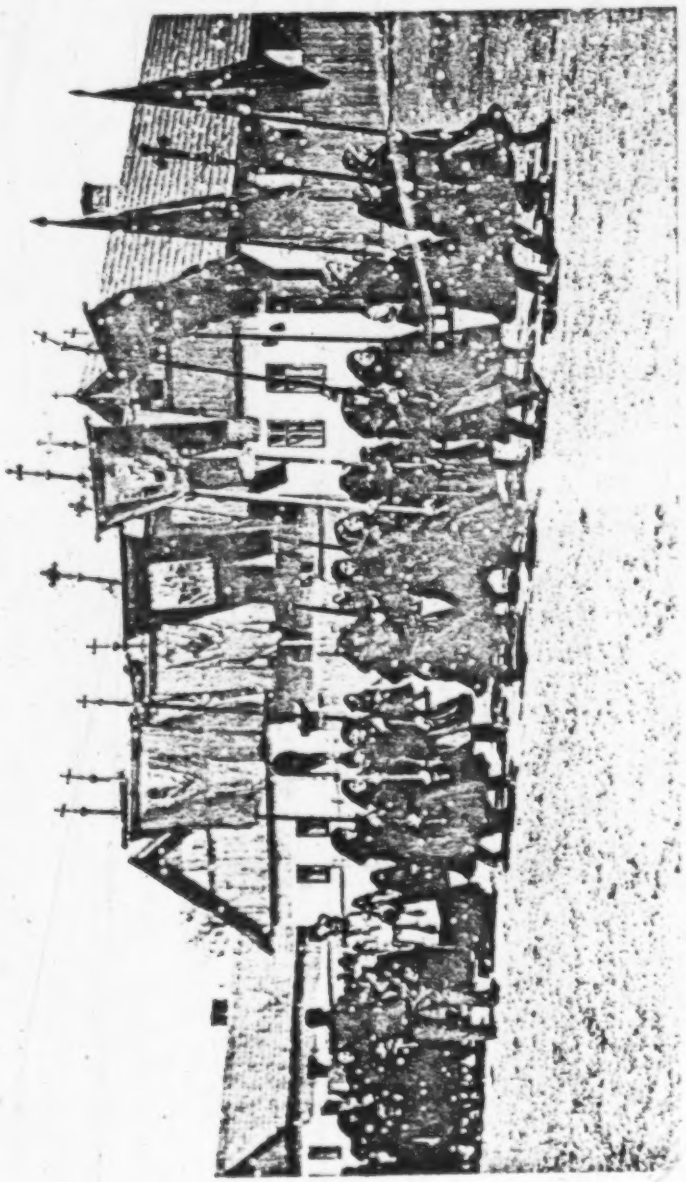

Photo : R. Balogh

Funeral

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765 822 few villages the mourning women tie a white linen band onto their forehead. Many a folk song, which is still sung to this day, preserves old popular customs:

While I live, I'll dress in black,
When I'm dead, I'll walk in white...

Or another one:

Mother dear!
Find my white dress,
I'm starting on a journey
From which I shan't return.

Even older memories are referred to in this folk song:

I'd rather mourn for her in three colours of mourning:
On Friday in red,
On Saturday in white,
On Sunday in dead black...

765 There are places where the funeral feast is repeated at certain regular intervals. At this feast they lay a place for the deceased, crossing his knife with his fork, and putting his turned up plate on top of them, while his chair is left empty. According to a local custom when the wailing Hungarian mourners of Moldavia are offered brandy and bread, they always lift their glass and wish that the dead could also share in their drink.

775 According to the Funeral Speech (a historic relic from the 12th century we are dust and ashes... But according to the still live faith of our ancient religion: non omnis moriar... We shall rise again. And our people believe faithfully that we do not even die, our soul merely flies to a new world, to start a new life.

764 The crosses in the graveyard are decorated with resounding inscriptions invented either by the master carver himself, or if he has no poetic vein, then another village professional, the verse composer writes them. These inscrip-

764 tions are to console those left behind, and to impress all thoughtful people. But a huge mass of these kind of verses and doggerels, products of Hungarian humour and fatalism, have never yet been carved on a grave. This harvest is a peculiar growth of Hungarian popular poetry. One thus consoles:

Good old Czomba hated to eat tomatoes
Yet his soul shall enter straight into the Heavenly Garden.
You say he shall rise again: but he will not,
As far as he is concerned, the archangel blows in vain.

Besides the New Golden ABC of the calvinist students of Sárospatak has long announced that:

He who has once gone down a grave
Is unlikely to see daylight again.

Sometimes the staggeringly quick appearance of death bids people to think:

She stood in the doorway mixing a pudding
When death took her away at one single lugging.

Many a person has found his death in quarreling, to which Hungarians have always had an inclination. But fate has so placed us that someone has always been trailing his coat in front of us. Hungarians have fought just enough during a thousand years, and mostly not for their own sake. — Other people got into deadly trouble by accident, without wanting it. Fate pushing them into some tragic occurence, as in the case of Ferke Bodó:

My name is Ferke Bodó,
I was hit over the head by mistake,
Those who attacked me
Were lying in wait for Stephen Zöld
It was me they knocked down by mistake
That is why I died out of favour!

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And how many accidents can befall a person: 764

Here rests Aron Tóth,
He has been to many a market,
Horses he bought and sold,

Until he was kicked one day
By a gelding horse on his thigh
This is the receipt of his last deal.